Kate Wilhelm: Naming the Flowers

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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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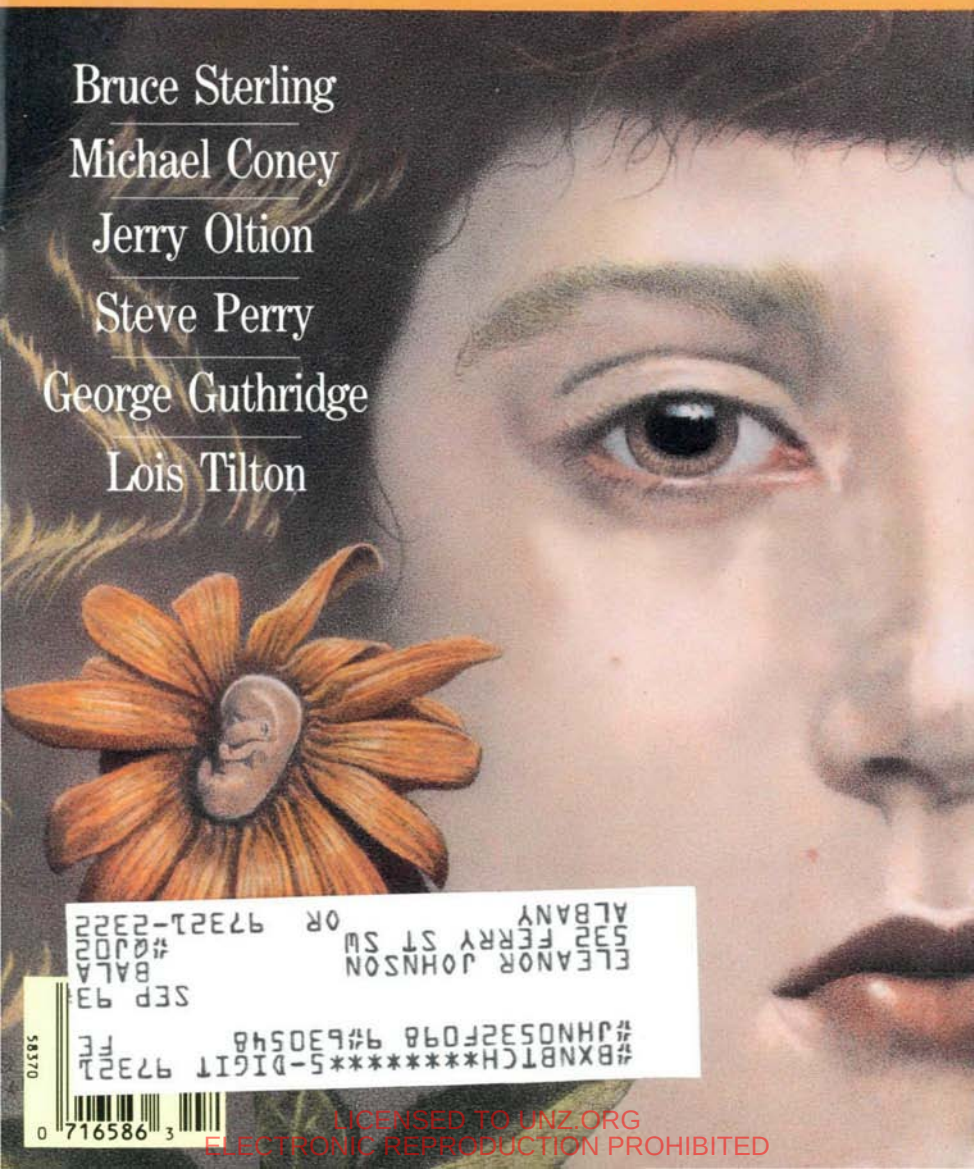

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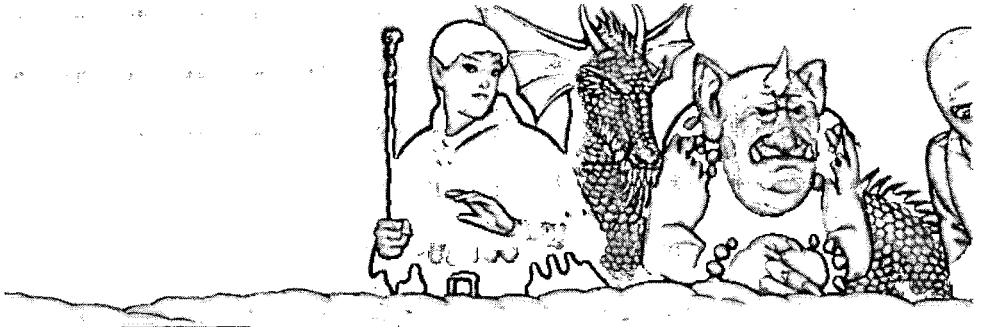

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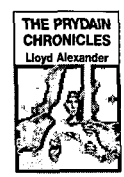

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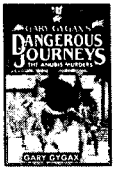

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

FEBRUARY • 44th Year of Publication

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NOVELET

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

THE YOUTH of science fiction as a genre startles me, often at the most inopportune moments. I often feel it at the World Science Fiction Convention, during presentations on the history of the field. I listen to stories told by people who have been writing since my grandmother was a girl. I know writers who have been published in the first science fiction magazines. Much of the genre's history still exists in oral form, and many farsighted writers are trying to put those stories to paper as quickly as possible.

In 1992, however, I felt the genre's youth in the middle of loss. Since April, we have lost a number of writers who wrote for this magazine. The most visible — and the most influential of them — was, of course, Isaac Asimov. But Reginald Bretnor and Fritz Leiber published much of their best work in these pages. Both Reg and Fritz had weathered each change of editorship — no mean feat — and continued to produce wonderful fiction until the day they died.

In all the years I have attended Worldcons and Nebula banquets, I can't remember one that hasn't gone by without a tribute to an sf writer who recently died. And I see the trend continuing, as the field's pioneers and early settlers move on to a world we have not yet conquered.

It seems morbid to reflect on this, but it's not really. It's just one more example of growth.

Literature has a life, just as human beings do, and that life follows certain patterns. The literature forms we read in school have been around for centuries. Those early practitioners had turned to dust so long ago that some of them — like Shakespeare —have no recorded birth or death day. We accept that the fiction is old, that the writers are long dead, but the stories live on. In fact, we never think about it. No one in this generation mourns the loss of Shakespeare because he has never been more than a byline behind some of the world's best plays.

But science fiction has been a

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community from the beginning. And the community has been a thriving circle of living writers, writers who shared ideas, writers who often fought against each other. Each death has been a blow, a reminder of our mortality. We're like children who have grown up in a commune. The death of each adult affects us like the loss of a parent. We know no one will ever fill those shoes again.

And no one will. Heinlein's juveniles—as well as many of his regular novels — will remain classics in the field. Asimov's laws of robotics have already made it into the common vernacular. New generations are discovering Leiber's Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser series. And someone should do a collection of Reginald Bretnor's short fiction, since he was one of the masters of the form.

But life continues and the genre forges ahead. We're going through a period of readjustment now, a period that will last — I think — through the coming decade. Like the children who have suddenly become the head of the family, we now must define ourselves differently. We are no longer part of a community in which everyone can converse and debate. Some of our greatest writers left the discussions years ago. We go on without them, but we miss them. To the generations just coming in, they are names, not faces.

We have been lucky to have known these people. We are lucky that those pioneers and early settlers who remain are writing autobiographies, and recording anecdotes, so that the field's oral history doesn't get lost. We are going through a change.

The transition will be a long one, and in some years (like 1992) not always pleasant. But the change is a natural one in the lifespan of the literature. We are slowly leaving our youth, and gaining an early middle age. We have gained not so much a maturity, because I think the genre has always had mature voices, and not so much an adulthood, because I think literature always speaks through the heart of youth, but a quiet acceptance that someday soon we will no longer have that older generation to shield us from our own mortality.

Fortunately, in literature, the voices live on long after the body goes. Our inheritance lies in a wealth of stories that have taken us to the stars and beyond. We will miss the conversations, but we will always have the heart — and the dreams.

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We begin this issue with a bittersweet story of life and love and passing time. Michael Coney runs Porthole Press on Vancouver Island. The press publishes local history and child safety books, although it has branched into its first fiction publication this year. Michael also finds time to write. "Sophie's Spyglass" is the first of two stories we have on hand.

Sophie's Spyglass

By Michael Coney

I KNEW IT was a mistake to come down here. It's a dead end. You'll have to turn round."

But he pulled into the side of the narrow lane and switched off. "Let's just sit a minute. We're in no hurry, are we?"

She heard herself give a little hiss of exasperation. Really, he seemed to get more peculiar with each passing year. There'd been plenty of places where he could have stopped to look at the view; they'd passed through some beautiful country. Why stop here, under these great ivy-strangled trees in this weird lane clinging to a steep hillside, with a mere glimpse of a tidal inlet and boats through twisted branches? They could have parked on the open hilltop back there. It was oppressive here in this tunnel of foliage.

He was winding down the window, letting in a whiff of sea air and moldering vegetation. "There's a path."

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"Going nowhere, I expect. Like this road."

"No — I can see a couple of cottages."

Good grief, he was fumbling for the door handle. He was going to get out. He was going to get himself beaten up by some rural hooligan or bitten by a snake or whatever. "Where do you think you're going?"

He turned to look at her, his blue eyes mild and guileless in his pink face. She knew that guileless look; he was feeling guilty about something. Ten years of marriage had taught her everything there was to know about him. There was absolutely no way he could pull the wool over *her* eyes, for heaven's sake. Or maybe he just wanted to take a pee.

"I thought I might take a short walk," he said.

"And leave me here alone? Anything might happen, out here miles from anywhere!"

"The village is only a mile back. Anyway, you can lock the car doors. Wind the window up if you see anyone carrying an ax. Or you can come with me."

"I'm not walking down that muddy trail. Not in this heat." He'd managed to park the car under the only gap in the forest canopy for miles, and the sun was already frying the car. Back home he'd assured her England was cool and pleasant in September, but this was more like the Amazon: one minute blistering sun, the next a tropical downpour. Strange uncivilized country with strange customs and strange plumbing. She'd felt out of place ever since they'd landed at Heathrow, picked up the tiny Fiat Panda and plunged in among a billion vehicles all driving like crazy on the wrong side of the road. Despite his knee problems they'd decided he should drive. It seemed the best way to stay alive, since he was originally English and might have some kind of race memory of right-hand drive.

"Besides," she said, "it looks like rain."

"Suit yourself."

There was something funny going on here. He wasn't the walking type; she knew his soccer knees had been paining him this last couple of days. Arthritis setting in at an early age; the changeable weather hadn't helped. He hadn't complained. He wouldn't want to give her the impression he wasn't enjoying this horribly expensive trip back to his old homeland. Typical Brit, stiff upper lip. Dumb Pom. He was just as out of place here as she was; it was his first visit to the Old Country in almost twenty years.

Oh, well, time to extend the olive branch. "That looked like a nice

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little pub back there in the village. Let's go and have a drink, and maybe a bite to eat." He liked pubs, and would sit for hours with a look of dreamy contentment and a glass of lukewarm beer, never noticing the choking tobacco fumes. Probably reliving soccer booze-ups on Saturday nights.

"They don't open for another half hour."

"How do you know?"

"There was a sign. Five o'clock, it said." He glanced at his watch. "Plenty of time."

"Listen, why are you so set on trekking down that trail in all this humidity?"

He hesitated. Was that a hunted expression in the blue eyes? "I think I knew some people down there once. When I was a kid. They were friends of my parents. The guy was older, a Canadian. He'd married this younger woman and settled here. I'm almost sure this was the place. I was only here once."

"Either they're dead or they've moved. Nobody'd stay in this godforsaken place all those years."

"The English aren't so mobile as us. And there was a daughter."

"She'd have moved out like all kids do. How old were you at the time, anyway?"

"About fourteen, I guess. We stayed in the village for a couple weeks and went sailing during the day, and Mom and Dad used to go to the pub with these people in the evenings. My dad was a keen sailor."

"This daughter. How old was she?"

"Uh. . . . About my age, I guess."

"What did she look like?"

He shifted uncomfortably. Good grief, he was embarrassed. "I hardly remember. I think she had brown eyes. Yeah, I seem to remember brown eyes. Nice enough kid."

"And you think she might be living down that trail. She might be down there right now, this very minute."

"Listen, it's not that important." He was trying to weasel out of it, now. She could tell. He'd said too much. Well, she wasn't going to let him get away with it.

"Your childhood sweetheart, just a hundred yards away."

"I wouldn't call her that, exactly."

She felt a queer and stupid anger boil up. "Well, what *would* you call

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her, exactly? While both your parents were whooping it up in the pub nights, what were you two doing? Cuddling in your dad's car?"

"It wasn't like that."

"Not like that? Two healthy fourteen-year-olds? Well, you tell me what it *was* like!"

"Jesus Christ, all that was years ago!"

He was being obtuse, as usual. "It's not how long ago it was, that's not the point. If you'd told me before, it'd be fine. It's the hiding it from me, the secrecy, the oh-look-where-we-are, I-do-believe-an-old-flame-lives-down-here. It's pathetic! Was this the whole reason for the holiday in England? You've dragged me God knows how many thousand miles so you could meet up with this, what's her name?"

"Sophie."

Sophie. . . .

And with the name, spoken for the first time in years, the memory came to him. What a pity that memories came in disconnected snippets like a scrapbook, like a scene through Sophie's spyglass. This particular memory was one of the big ones, a real front-page memory. Her eyes, watching him gravely as she replaced the spyglass in its hiding place.

Everything's there, she'd said, smiling. How could she smile at a time like this? His parents were taking him home tomorrow, and they were talking about emigrating! *That's you and me forever.* And he'd just grunted. After almost two weeks of enchantment, he could manage no more than a grunt.

Two weeks, that was all. A fortnight, they used to call it. Two weeks of not admitting out loud he was in love for the first time in his life.

Two weeks captured forever within the tubes and lenses of Sophie's spyglass, along with the history of Earth.

If you cared to look at it that way.

"Sophie! My God, you remembered her name easily enough! You know what your trouble is, don't you? It's the male menopause coming on. You can't face your age so you're trying to claw your way back to your youth. Well, it won't work. This Sophie isn't sweet fourteen anymore, you know. She's the same age as me. Time takes its toll!"

"Take it easy, dear. You look fine to me, always have."

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"It's a wonder we're driving this Panda. Men with your problem rent Porsches or Miatas . . . but I guess the price put you off. So you've been hankering after this girl all your life, have you?"

"Of course not."

"Don't tell me you haven't thought of her now and then."

"Now and then, naturally. In all these years she's bound to cross my mind occasionally."

That reasonable tone of his was infuriating. He actually seemed to be humoring her! "I've always told you everything. I told you when I ran into Ted that time. I believe in total honesty between husband and wife, how many times have I told you that? So how come you've never told me about this girl before?"

"Really, there didn't seem to be any point, honey."

What was the use? All these years, and that girl always slinking around his mind like a hooker. Did she really know her own husband? God knows, she tried. She'd taken an interest in his work, such as it was, they'd always gone on holidays together, she'd made sure she'd shared his hobbies: sailing, bridge. People spoke of theirs as the perfect marriage. And now this.

"If you go now, you won't find the car here when you get back!" No, maybe she was being just a tad unreasonable; it was this goddamned heat. Good grief, if she didn't get out of here she'd melt! She'd always known he was unworldly, but how could he be so stupid? "Listen, you remember her as a pretty kid of fourteen. Now she's my age — getting on toward middle age, if she feels the way I do. The bloom is off us all. Don't you understand you're going to destroy a beautiful memory if you clap eyes on her now? You have this lovely picture in your mind and you're going to ruin it. They always say: Never go back; and that's why. You'll spoil it all for yourself. Don't you see?" There! She couldn't be fairer than that.

"Now I'm here, it would be kind of dumb not to take a look. For old times' sake." He opened the door.

She watched him walk away, past a tumbledown shed and into the trees. He hadn't taken his cane; probably didn't want to look like a cripple in front of Sophie. Just look at him, poor dumb Pom. It looked like there was almost a spring to his step. Well, she'd tried to save him from himself but he hadn't listened. Just like she'd tried to tell him they couldn't possibly afford this holiday on his pay. Too bad. She could do no more. He

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was a born loser.

THE WATER was bustling with boats even this late in the season. He stepped off the path and stood on the high bank overlooking the water. The inlet zigzagged away, bright with sunshine, affording a glimpse of open sea beyond a rocky headland.

"A fine port in a storm," Sophie had told him, all those years ago. "Windjammers used to shelter here from storms in the Channel, my dad told me." And now, just pleasure boats: mostly sailboats, a few powerboats. Picturesque all the same.

They'd sailed together, he and Sophie; the inlet had been almost empty of boats in those days. She had a fourteen-foot dinghy called *Carousel.* "Because if you don't watch what you're doing she goes round and round." She'd let him take the tiller after a while; he'd never sailed before. They'd sat side by side on the gunwale and at first she'd stared anxiously ahead. Then, when he'd seemed to have gotten the hang of it, he'd become aware that she was watching him. He was sure she enjoyed seeing the panic on his face whenever a puff of wind heeled the boat.

"The worst that can happen is we might get wet. You can swim, can't you? You'd be surprised how many townies can't swim." Her brown eyes dancing with mischief.

"It's great. I wish it'd never end," he'd said doggedly.

"In a way, it doesn't end."

At the time he'd wondered what she meant. . . .

He walked on. There, through the trees, was the cottage. No, nothing much changed in these parts. The same salt scent of the sea, the same gnarled branches groping overhead, the same profusion of wildflowers sparkling with raindrops. She'd known the names of all the flowers. God, he could almost hear her voice.

"Do you like flowers? No, of course you don't. Boys don't; they think they're sissy. Anyway, these are harebells and that's loosestrife and that's willow herb. You don't mind me telling you, do you? You never know when it might come in useful."

And she'd bent down and picked something purple — he'd already forgotten its name — and tucked it into the neck of his T-shirt. He'd grabbed her hand to pull it away and they'd both gone suddenly still.

"Oh," she'd said quietly.

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He'd stared into the brown eyes, now serious, and he'd fallen in love forever. But he couldn't tell her because that would be sissy too.

"Come on!" She'd run away suddenly. "Let's go sailing!"

Memories. . . . At the open window of the pub, hearing their parents' voices inside. Her mother: "It's good for her to have a friend. I worry sometimes, it's rather lonely for her stuck at the end of the road during school holidays." And his mother: "He's a very shy boy. I'm quite surprised."

And the brown eyes watching him. . . .

Here was the cottage. He stopped, suddenly breathless. Foursquare and rock-built God knows how many centuries ago, fresh-painted white with blue trim. An elderly man sat dozing in a rattan chair beside the door. A low wall around the front garden, just as he remembered it. A low gate, also blue with a rough paved path to the front door. The view to the inlet opened up here; cows grazed on the meadows of the opposite shore. A rocky bank descended to a beach; tilted dinghies huddled above the high-tide mark.

Nothing had changed.

That last sailing trip had been different; he'd been going home the next day, and then maybe to the States forever. Barely a breath of wind; he'd steered. She'd been sitting on the thwart facing him, leaning against the gunwale with one arm hanging over the side, fingers trailing in the slow water. Her head rested on her shoulder as she gazed up at him.

He'd watched her hand; he couldn't look at her face. *That is the hand of the girl I love,* he'd told himself. Idiotic kid's stuff; God, they were young. Surely kids were a bit more mature these days?

Then she'd chuckled and said in a fair imitation of his mother's voice, "He's a very shy boy." He'd felt himself flush, and raised his eyes to her face. She had very white teeth, plump cheeks and dimples. Quite unexpectedly she'd said, "We'll see each other again."

"I don't suppose so," he'd said gloomily.

"I'll show you. Everything that happens will always be. We can see each other anytime."

It was in the bush at the back of the cottage, almost invisible, dressed in ivy and overhung with lichen-encrusted branches. An ancient shed. The roof had fallen in long ago, but the stone walls were intact.

"Here." She'd slid a rock from the wall. "My secret place." There was a

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narrow box in her hands, about a foot long, smooth old rosewood. It opened on brass hinges.

"A telescope."

"My granddad gave it to me, ages ago. He'd got it from some sailor. He called it a spyglass. He said. . . ." She'd hesitated. "He said it had to be a secret, and the secret must be kept by simple people. He didn't mean, like, stupid. He meant . . . *innocent*." She'd flushed a deep red. "He said I was . . . like that. And . . . I think you are, too. So I trust you. He said if the wrong kind of people got hold of it, they could do all sorts with it. Bad stuff."

"But it's just an old telescope."

"That's what *you* think. Come on!"

She'd run down to the bank above the inlet and held the telescope to her eye for a long time, making microscopic adjustments to the focus.

"You need to pull it out farther. You haven't got it extended enough."

"Yes, I have. I've got it just right. There! You take a look!"

She guided his hand until a small boat came into view, sailed by a couple of kids about their age. Just a couple of kids. . . . Then suddenly he'd known, and a shiver had run down his spine, because this was really weird.

"That's. . . . That's your boat. That's *us*."

"Last week, yes."

"But. . . ."

"Kind of strange, isn't it? I hope you're not scared. You wouldn't be, I bet, being a boy. But I was *real* scared the first time I looked into it. You've got to be careful how you focus it, see? I saw a dinosaur, first time. A real-life dinosaur, stomping about on the other side of the creek. Then I took the spyglass away from my eye and the dinosaur wasn't really there at all. Not that day, anyway."

"That doesn't make sense. Does it?" The sailboat had slipped behind the trees and the inlet looked just the same as it did that day, that time. Did she think he was scared? Huh! "All right, show me a dinosaur."

"I can't. I tried again, when I got used to the spyglass. The farther you extend it, the longer ago you see. But the adjustment gets very fine. You can zip through millions of years if your fingers twitch. It's just luck if you happen to catch something happening. Recent things are much easier, with the spyglass almost shut up."

"Millions of years?" A permanent mount and some kind of gearing

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could handle the twitching problem. "Have you ever opened it right out?"

"Of course I have, silly. But there was nothing there. Just blackness. Really, it's quite a dumb old spyglass."

"But you could see," his imagination took off, "the *Titanic* sinking. You could watch the first men climbing down from the trees. You could watch murders happening — you could be the greatest detective of all time!"

"But you have to *be* there, huh? You have to *be* where it happened, focusing on the right spot. The field of vision is real small. And it all takes time. You have to look through the spyglass for just as long as it takes things to happen on the other side. It's really not all that terrific," she hesitated, "except for one thing."

He'd sat on a stump, the telescope in his hand, trying to grasp the implications. "The history of the Earth's in here," he remembered saying, marveling.

"And the history of you and me," Sophie had said, which was probably why her grandfather had called her innocent.

Beautiful. The inlet was beautiful and so were the memories. What a great idea it had been, to come back just this one time. Everything was coming alive again. She'd worn a blue dress and . . . yes! One day she'd actually worn a hat. A kind of wide-brimmed straw affair circling her heart-shaped face like a halo; she must have been coming from church or something.

"Do you like it?" she'd asked.

And his heart had thumped as he detected real anxiety in her tone. And he'd just grunted something graceless. He was a boy, after all, and that was the way he was supposed to behave. Besides, it was less embarrassing to grunt than to say: *You are the loveliest girl I've ever seen in my life.*

He found himself turning left past the cottage, his feet following an almost indefinable trail into the bush. His hands were pushing aside ivy, pulling a square-dressed rock from the old wall.

He opened the rosewood box and the spyglass lay in his hands. The wide end was covered with warm brown leather; the other two sections were brass, dull but not unduly oxidized. It felt used; lovingly used. It had not been left forgotten all these years.

She'd said, "And another thing, you can't *hear* what's going on, or *smell*

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it or anything. You can only *see*. It has its limitations. Maybe that's why Granddad always called it a spyglass. In its way, it's quite frustrating. But it never forgets like we do. Will you forget?"

And he'd mumbled something, ashamed of the depth of his love.

He took the spyglass to the high bank and stood there for a while. After what seemed quite a short time he glanced at his watch. Jesus wept, it was six o'clock! It was a wonder the one-woman task force hadn't come storming down the trail after his blood. He replaced the spyglass in its box, secured it in Sophie's secret place, and walked away lost in thought.

Sophie had said, "There's something else about the spyglass."

They'd been sitting on the steps down to the beach, looking for dinosaurs and seeing only trees. There had been a heck of a lot of trees about, long ago. And before that: just a touch of the fingers and there wasn't much of anything at all. Like she'd said, the spyglass had its limitations. Or maybe history did.

"Something else?"

"Try looking through the other end."

The image was very small, but when he'd closed the spyglass up more he'd been able to make out the estuary, tiny and glittering. Boats, lots of them. And something else. A sleek craft, seemingly built of dark glass and mounted on stilts, had sped silently by and vanished in a plume of spray.

"The future. You can see the future."

"Yes."

"How far?"

"Right to the end of Time. You must be able to see right to the end, because that's how far the spyglass opens out. But the image is so tiny it hurts your eyes after a while. It's not much fun, looking into the future."

A sudden cruel whim had taken hold of him, and he'd turned the spyglass on Sophie.

She'd screamed, covering her face with her hands.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Sophie."

But she'd smiled, although the brown eyes still showed a trace of alarm. "I forgot. You won't see an old withered Sophie. Not unless I happened to be sitting right here at the exact moment you'd focused on. I'm safe. Thank goodness. What are you going to be when you grow up?"

"A famous soccer star. . . ."

With that memory he began to notice the pain in his knees. Better take

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it easy. Yes, a good solid mount and some gearing, and a guy could see into the future quite clearly, if that was what he wanted. Probably worth a few bucks, that. Probably worth a king's ransom. A guy's money worries could be all over.

Maybe he should take it along with him.

And then again, maybe not. The spyglass was being used; he could tell. Someone needed it, and he hoped he knew who that someone was. Maybe some memories were worth more than a king's ransom. . . .

"Are you all right?"

He started. Good grief, he'd been miles away; years away. A woman was watching him anxiously from the other side of the garden wall. He'd been sitting on it. He stood, feeling like a trespasser. "Sorry. I'm fine. I was just resting for a moment. Uh, beautiful view you have up here."

She was about his age, thick brown hair tumbling over her face, about five-seven, slim, wearing a blue shirt and jeans. She held a pair of garden shears in one hand, pushed back her hair with the other. She was flushed from bending down and snipping.

"American, are you?"

"Yeah. Born in England, though. I guess I must have picked up an accent over the years."

After the first glance at her face he found he was watching her hands. They rested on the rocks of the garden wall in tranquil fashion, the shears held lightly. Good hands. Strong yet slim. "Over here on holiday?" Her voice was deep and pleasant with a faint Devon burr.

"Yeah. First time in England for twenty years."

She laughed. "I bet you've noticed some changes."

"Some. Not around these parts, though."

"Nothing changes here. It's a good place to be."

"Doesn't it get lonely? In the winter, I mean?"

"Not really. I love all the seasons here, and my old dad's good company. The village is only a step away, and the snow never settles in this part of the country."

"Nice garden you have."

"Thanks." They turned together to admire the display. It was unplanned, informal and totally beautiful, just an artless blaze of contrasting colors against the white of the cottage.

"I see some dinghies down there. I guess the sailing's pretty good here,

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is it?"

"Good fun for dinghies, but it's a bit narrow for the bigger stuff. The wind generally blows in from the sea or in the opposite direction, and they don't have room to beat against it."

"It looks a pretty secure anchorage."

"Oh, it's a fine port in a storm. Back in the twenties and thirties, they often had windjammers in here sheltering from the weather, so Dad tells me."

It was time to be moving on. "That must have been quite a sight." He eased himself away from the wall. "You have a lovely place. Nice talking to you."

"Bye."

He glanced back as the path took him into the trees again. She was watching him. He waved, and she raised a hand in response, smiling.

HERE HE came at last, poor guy. God, but she'd been rotten to him, and probably just because of the heat. He seemed to be walking slowly; she hoped he hadn't slipped and strained his knees. No, he wasn't limping unduly. Probably just a tad depressed. Either he was unhappy because he'd met her, or unhappy because he hadn't. It was a no-win situation, and if she'd known about that Sophie earlier she wouldn't have let it happen. Hang on to those dreams.

He got into the car, saying nothing. He seemed to be staring at the inlet, or what could be seen of it through all this goddamned bush.

"Well?"

He looked at her vacantly. "What?"

"Did you see her?"

For once his eyes told her nothing. He seemed to be in a trance. "See who?"

"Well, anyone. That girl. Whoever."

"Oh, yes," he said, as though he'd just remembered — as if he could kid *her* — "there was a woman living with her father at the old cottage."

"Well. . . . What did she look like?"

"Oh. . . . Usual kind of English countrywoman. They all start looking alike as they get older."

Well, she wasn't fooled for one moment. How naive could the guy get? "Tell me straight. Granted that she looked like every other woman of her

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age, would you say she was better-looking than me or not?"

He regarded her. Well now, he thought. Over ten years ago, when she'd first walked into his office, the first thing he'd noticed about her was her eyes. Brown eyes, smiling in a heart-shaped almost-chubby face with dimples. Good figure, excellent legs. He could even remember that first instant of lust; it had been when she'd sat in the chair opposite, crossed her legs and smiled. A nice wide mouth. Good dress sense. And she'd looked good through pregnancy, and after. She hadn't dyed her hair now it was getting the odd gray fleck. She looked *right* that way somehow; quite elegant, really. Kept that figure well too; she sure turned him on when she undressed at night.

It had been a good marriage, by and large, despite the chronic shortage of funds. Sure she thought he was a dumb Pom. Any Englishman forty years old has to be a dumb Pom; he's had forty years' worth of chances to screw up.

"Better-looking than you, my love? Not a chance. She had a nice garden, though. . . ."

The sun was dropping toward the hillside and jewels flashed around the rims of the wet leaves. A sailboat passed, all of fifty foot, diesel auxiliary chugging as it cut a wake toward the open sea, maybe going to sail around the world. No point in trying to beat against the wind in this inlet.

One day I'd like to sail around the world. Would you! Sophie's round eyes had been very serious when she'd asked that question. He'd said, *Maybe*, with that thick scared thumping in his throat again. And she'd said, *Of course, I'd need someone with me. You have to stand watches, you know.* And he'd almost said it then: *I'd go with you, Sophie! I'd go to the rim of the Galaxy with you!* But he hadn't, because he was shy, and fourteen, and a boy.

Well, what the hell. It had been beautiful. And at the end when the parents were shaking hands and all that adult stuff, right in front of them she'd suddenly lunged forward and kissed him clumsily on the lips; then backed off, face flaming, the hat she'd put on for the occasion knocked crooked, her hand to her mouth and her eyes wide. Then she'd recovered, straightened the hat and grinned saucily at him, as if to say: *Got you!*

He could see it all vividly, as if it had happened yesterday. Jesus, he felt like a kid again! The moored boats were rocking gently in the wake of

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another ocean-bound ketch. The shadows seemed to have lengthened quite suddenly.

"I said, are we going to sit here all night?"

But she kept her voice gentle. He looked so lost, sitting there quietly nursing his broken dream, the passage of time brought home to him so cruelly. A big sad kid. A lovable ex-jock who'd never make a fortune, but then who in the hell really needed a fortune? He should get away from this gloomy place and she knew just where to go. She took his hand. "Hey, dreamer, let's get going! The pub's been open over an hour!"

He seemed to perk up immediately. "Good thinking, my love," he said, and turned the ignition key.

"Have a nice day! Have a nice day! Have a nice . . ."

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Brain Child, George Turner (Avon, paper, 411pp, $4.99)

I'M A little late coming out of the gate on this one. Turner, an Australian writer, published this one in '91, and I didn't notice it until the paperback came out. At first glance, it seems to be just another one of those old breeding-for-genius stories, where a secret government experiment to create supergeniuses through genetic manipulation has gone terribly, terribly wrong.

And, in fact, that's what it is. Only Turner, unlike most who have written in this little subgenre, has decided to put flesh and blood actors on his stage instead of marionettes. While the storyline has something of a mystery-and-quest structure to it, in fact the fascination comes from meeting the quirky but absolutely believable people moving through a genuinely convincing future.

The hero-narrator, David Chance, grew up as an orphan in a state-run institution. He is working as a journalist when he gets a letter from a man claiming to be his father. It isn't exactly the father an orphan dreams of, either — his new dad is one of a group of four extraordinarily intelligent scientific minds who were produced in a genetic experiment years before, and, to say the least, his father is even less aware of how a proper father should act than David himself.

And papa has an agenda. He wants David to do some research for him — research that ends up leaving a trail of corpses. There were four groups of experimental babies born at the same time: David's father's group, which became mathematical and technological geniuses; a group that has become artistic geniuses; a group that died shortly after birth; and another group, the one so brilliant that no one understood them. That last group is the mystery: Why did they

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kill themselves? And what is the hidden legacy that one of them left behind?

Turner has written a dandy mystery as David tracks down people who knew the experimental kids; you get all the car chases and spy-like goings-on you might want; and as science fiction the story is interesting and offers a fascinating exploration of what genuine genius might actually be like, in all its fascinating and unpleasant details. All the characters are interesting, well-created individuals who are both believable and endlessly surprising. And the writing, which could have been affectedly stylish since the narrator is supposed to be a wordsmith, is restrained and clear enough to be a contribution to the story, rarely a distraction. While you don't become emotionally involved in anybody's personal dilemmas, the puzzles, the action, and the unraveling story of the past grip you all the way to the eminently satisfying and yet surprising climax.

Turner even brings off a tour-de-force scene in which the narrator is trapped within a work of art created by one of the experimental artist geniuses. This sort of thing, where the writer sets himself the task of showing the reader in detail an imaginary work of genius usually is disastrous — I think at once of the supposed genius phase of the hero of Disch's *Camp Concentration*, the only weak link in an otherwise brilliant novel; and the far more ludicrous "artistic genius" of the second act of Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*, where we find out that the artistic successor to Seurat has created as his masterpiece a laser show even more boring than the one at Stone Mountain, Georgia. Where others of great talent have failed, Turner succeeds, and for me that was the high point of a book with many startling and effective scenes.

Just a word about the Australians of the novel. Science fiction has long had as one of its givens that the near future will either be dominated by the United States — if it isn't, its failure to dominate must be explained. British writers often do this by going out of their way to include a passage that sneers a bit (or a lot) at Americans, so that when their stories are set in a future that does not include a dominant U.S. we get a feeling that we're reading a kind of wish-fulfillment fiction. Turner, on the other hand, never makes a big deal about the fact that the novel takes place in Australia, and never registers even the faintest surprise that such astonishing scientific achievements would take place in Australia. There's a lot of satire on govern-

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ment (based on a dead-on understanding of how politics and power work in a "democracy"), but never a hint of an attitude of apology or explanation. Turner has not cocked his eye at an American audience and helped "explain" the hard bits; America is so irrelevant to the milieu of his story that it never comes up. No references to consulting American scientists or anyone else outside Australia; no explanations about how Australia fits into the world picture at large.

In fact, one could even say that Turner is so completely Australian-centered that the rest of the world might not even exist as far as the story is concerned — Australia is world enough to contain this tale. I point this out not as a flaw in the book, and not as praise of it either. I did find it jarring now and then, and found myself wondering where America fit in Turner's vision of the future — did the whole North American continent sink into the sea? But even as I had those thoughts, I also realized that this is *precisely* how most American science fiction for many decades has seemed to non-U.S. readers. It is simply taken for granted that anything that matters in the world of the future will be American. So it's a deliciously sharp experience to read a novel that seems to have exactly that level of naive arrogance, only centered in a different country. Whether Turner did this deliberately or merely happens to be a blindly australocentric writer I cannot guess and do not care. Along with the wonderful feast of a novel Turner has written, American readers get the extra pleasure of having the tables turned.

Fag Hag, Robert Rodi (Dutton, cloth, 296pp, $20)

Anyone who has ever moved along the borders of the homosexual community (which means, in my case, anyone who has been actively involved in theatre) has probably run into the phenomenon of women who seem endlessly fascinated with men who are simply not fascinated back. While "fag hag" is a cruel and contemptuous slang term for such women, it is also memorable, and when I saw the hot maroon title on a vivid green background on the jacket of this book, the words leapt out at me as, no doubt, the cover designer meant them to do. It brought back memories of my bafflement in college days.

Examining the book in the bookstore, it became clear that this was a book that could be just as cruel as its title. The author is clearly identified as gay, and the storyline clearly puts the heterosexual women in the role of "bad guy," as Natalie

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cannot bring herself to accept the fact that *this* time her friend (and fixation), Peter, has found genuine love instead of just another fling. She has lost him, or at least lost *possession* of him, and she can't bear it; so she sets out to win him back, and if she can't do that, well, she'll find *some* way to keep him from leaving her, even if it involves the teensiest bit of violence and coercion.

Now, I well know, as I held the book in my hands, that stories written from inside a minority community often have serious problems reaching people from outside that community. I've seen the phenomenon often enough with fiction by and about Mormons. Most Mormon writers, when writing for the mainstream audience about their own people, tend either to try to explain to the outsider how *wonderful* it is to be Mormon or to complain about all their grievances with the Mormon community in hopes of making the reader as angry about Mormons as the writer is. Both approaches usually leave the non-Mormon reader baffled, since he basically has no stake in the community and really doesn't care. The result has been that in the New York publishing business it is widely known that "Mormon books don't sell."

Of course, Mormon books of exactly the type I've described *do* sell — within the Mormon community itself. And the same thing is true of gay fiction. It sells within its own community, but fiction by and about gays aimed at the general audience often falls into the same errors: either trying to show how wonderful (or tragically noble) it is to be gay, or "doing a number" on negative types within the gay community. In neither case is the mainstream audience likely to be terribly interested.

But this book seemed different. For one thing, the author was daring enough to tell the story, not from the point of view of the victimized Peter, but from the point of view of Natalie herself. For another thing, right from the start Peter was shown as being beautiful but shallow. If this was a gimmick Rodi used to overcome the assumption of most straight readers that a story about a gay by a gay would be worshipful, well, the gimmick worked.

I bought the book. I started reading. And I soon realized that I was in the hands of a masterful storyteller who was trying to do with gay society what I have tried to do with Mormon society in those few stories I've written that are set within it: To tell a truthful, entertaining story about fascinating characters in a strange but real milieu without ever asking the reader either to approve

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or disapprove of the community the characters belong to.

I hope I've been even partially as successful as Rodi was with this book. It *is* a comic novel, of course, and much is sharpened for comic effect. Rodi's presentation of some flamboyantly bitchy or effeminite characters is funny, yes, but never at the cost of reality or understanding. Nobody is saintly, and nobody is evil — not even Natalie, not even when she's doing the most cruel things to hold onto the man she "loves." There is the ring of truth in everything Rodi does, if only because he never leaves a stereotype unsubverted, never lets us evade the consequences of an act of cruelty, and always forces us to see how even the most insane behavior looks from the point of view of the person who did it.

By talking so seriously, of course, I have probably led you to miss the most important fact about this book: It's funny. It's good. I don't have the same moral worldview as the author, of course, but then I often don't. What matters to me — and the reason why I'm reviewing this book in a column that (yes, I remembered) is supposedly devoted to science fiction and fantasy — is that Rodi, with his first novel, has done a marvelous job of introducing readers into an unfamiliar society, giving it depth and detail and attitude until you feel that you've lived there. Of course, Rodi had the advantage that those in our field who write about made-up societies never have: He has lived there. Robert Forward didn't have that luxury as he wrote *Dragon's Egg*, for instance, and if he ever *had* visited the surface of a neutron star I doubt he'd have felt like writing when he got back. But that doesn't change the fact that much of science fiction is written about passages across the borderlines of strange lands. Just as Clavell's *Shogun* is widely regarded as an ideal of world-creation, I think Rodi's *Fag Hag* can also serve as a useful exemplar of community-creation.

But hey, you don't have to think of it as *medicine* or anything. You can switch off your brain at the beginning of the book and Rodi will give you several hours of wonderful dumb fun. There aren't enough books that can do that, either.

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Mark Budz has become a name to watch in the last year. His short fiction has appeared in Writers of the Future, Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine, *and* Amazing Stories. *He has just moved to Santa Cruz, California, with his fiance, F&SF regular Marina Fitch. Mark wrote this story to read to a gathering of friends on Christmas Eve. "Toy Soldiers" marks his first appearance in F&SF.*

Toy Soldiers

By Mark Budz

HOME APPEARS OUT of the snow like a mirage in a white desert storm.

Your parents' house is a one-story tract home at the end of a steep cul-de-sac. It is red with gray trim, has a snow-covered lawn and a brittle-limbed maple whose branches make you think of dead fingers reaching up out of a grave. Except for the color, the house looks like one out of every fourth home in the 1970s housing development.

You pull up in the driveway and sit in your car for a few minutes, looking at home. You haven't been home in nine months, not since the Gulf War, but now it seems more like nine years. Maybe this was never home. If it weren't for the address, you wouldn't be sure. Nothing seems certain anymore. Therapy was supposed to take care of that, but your recovery is still uncertain as well.

Christmas lights frame the roofline and windows. Red, white and

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green. Blue, too. Through the living room window you can see the Christmas tree, smaller lights winking on and off behind the half-drawn curtains.

After a while you see a face. Your sister Tammy, peering out at your car. When you open the door to get out of the car the face disappears, and you know that they know you're coming. Will be there soon.

Home for Christmas.

Your mother, not Tammy, opens the door. Her smile is genuine, her arms warm as they wrap you in a heavy embrace. She smells the way she always has, like cooked food . . . like all of the dinners you had growing up.

"We're so glad to see you," Mom says. "How does it feel to be home?"

"Fine," you say. "It feels good."

Dad is there to greet you, too. His smile is forced, too big. He's had to suffer as much as you did, maybe more. After all, his son is one of the ones that broke down under fire. It might as well have been himself. His smile covers that up — disappointment, embarrassment, shame, anger — all of the things he's feared discovering in himself his entire life. You've exposed it, a raw nerve for the world to see.

Tammy is there also, and your little brother Jeffrey. Twelve and six. They all hug you, then lead you into the family room and the heavy smell of meat roasting, vegetables and apple pie.

On the surface, nothing has changed. Everything is the way it was when you left.

Except for Mr. Potato Head, sitting on the couch.

He takes up one whole cushion on the far end. He's watching TV. A football game. You don't know which one. It doesn't matter.

Dad gestures for you to sit down. Mr. Potato Head looks exactly the way he did thirteen years ago when you were Jeffrey's age. He still has a piece of his head missing, one eye loose and no ears. If he had ears he'd look a little like Dad. Bald on the top with a lopsided mustache.

"Long time no see," Mr. Potato Head says to you. "Have a seat."

"How was the trip out?" Dad asks.

"O.K.," you say, dropping down beside the plastic head as large as your body.

Over in the kitchen, Mom, Tammy and Jeffrey settle into a tentative routine, try to pretend like nothing's happened, as if everything is the same. This is for your benefit. A staged production, to make you feel comfortable.

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They know their lines, have rehearsed them all, and you feel like a drop of oil in water, not quite able to mix. They're walking on eggshells, and their uncertainty makes you feel fragile.

The thought that they can see inside of you makes you uncomfortable.

"It's all right," Mr. Potato Head says.

"It's good to see you," Dad says.

"Why's that?" you ask Mr. Potato Head, an image of yourself as a glass man in your head, everything inside you visible — organs, brain, blood vessels, just like in one of those anatomy books, except that people are able to see what you're thinking as well.

"Because you're home now, and that's all that counts," Dad tells you.

"You have nothing to hide," Mr. Potato Head tells you in answer to your question. "Stop trying to hide. These things happen and people will forgive you."

"No," you say. You remember how long it took Dad to get over his anger when you smashed Mr. Potato Head the same Christmas Day you got him. You were playing World War II, and Mr. Potato Head made a good hand grenade, his hat, ears, eyes and nose exploding from him like shrapnel when he hit.

"I understand," Dad says. "You need time."

Then Mom comes out of the kitchen.

"Dinner is ready," she says, and when you look next to you, Mr. Potato Head is gone.

Dinner is ham, mashed potatoes, bread, and cauliflower with hollandaise sauce. Dad talks about the Broncos and the new baseball team. Mom talks about the neighbors, people you haven't thought about in months and who mean nothing to you. Tammy talks about school — about the Christmas play she was in and how she got to play Mary and hold a baby doll in her arms.

"Did you play golf?" Jeffrey asks halfway through the meal.

"Jeffrey," Mom hisses.

You know what he's talking about. You've seen the T-shirt with George Bush on it, stomping all over Iraq with a golf club in his hands, as if it was a game. A game, yes that's what it must have seemed like.

"Yes," you say, "lots of eagles, birdies and bogeys," but you doubt he understands the military terms, the mixed metaphors. Dad laughs and

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claps you on the shoulder.

"Excuse me," you say, pushing your chair back from the table. "I think I'd like to go for a walk."

YOU GO out into the backyard, out the fence gate that leads to the small park behind the houses next to yours.

One of the Transformers you got for Christmas one year is waiting there, a robot that can change into a tank or a jet fighter. It walks beside you as you make your way out to the sandbox in the middle of the park where the jungle gym, swings and slide are still standing.

"What are you doing here?" you ask.

"Mr. Potato Head sent me," the robot says in a metallic voice.

"Why?"

"Because you wouldn't listen to him."

"I don't even know what he said." You grab one of the bars on the jungle gym and squeeze it tight. The metal is hard and cold, the way Uncle Sam trained you to be inside. But you're flesh and blood. Not like the robot beside you.

You wanted to be a robot back then. A Transformer. You wanted to be able to change your shape at will so that you'd be indestructible.

And you were, up until a few months ago. You were made of steel. Nothing could hurt you. Uncle Sam had turned you into a fighting machine. He gave you a tank to wear around your body so you could kill and not be killed.

It was the killing you couldn't handle. Not like when you were a kid playing with Transformers.

"He said to forgive yourself." The robot is no longer a robot, but a futuristic fighter floating beside your head.

"No, he didn't. He said to stop trying to hide and let people forgive me."

"It's the same thing."

"No, it's not. People will never forgive me, not even if I forgive myself."

You think of Dad, with his false smile covering up what he's really feeling.

"It wasn't what you thought it would be," the fighter says. "It never is. I tried to tell you that when you were younger, but you wouldn't listen. After all of the battles you had me fight in, I couldn't change shape the

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way I could when I was new. Remember?"

The fighter is on the ground now, halfway between being a fighter and a tank.

"You broke," you say.

"So did you," the Transformer says, standing beside you in robot form again.

"I can't be fixed," you say. "Neither can you."

"It's all right," the robot tells you. "There are some shapes it's better not to be in."

You walk back to the house, and notice that the robot doesn't become a fighter, but stays a robot walking on two legs like you.

That evening you go to midnight mass. You haven't been to church in almost a year. There was a priest in the Gulf, but not a church. The smell of burning incense, women with too much perfume, and hot wax of the candles makes your head light. So does the noise of all the parishioners, crammed together in the pews.

There's a wooden Nativity scene down in front of the altar with a plastic baby in the manger.

Jesus.

G.I. Joe hangs on the cross behind the altar.

His limbs are twisted at an impossible angle to secure him on the cross and his fatigues are tattered, the way you left them. His haircut is still perfect, though, and unlike Jesus when he was crucified, G.I. Joe's face is calm and free of pain.

His face is the one you wanted to wear when you signed up to be all that you could be. From the Christmas you got him you lived inside his body and tried to make it your own.

Weight training in high school and ROTC. Karate. Hair short, face clean-shaven.

No blood leaks from the holes in G.I. Joe's palms where they have been pierced by nails. G.I. Joe does not bleed and neither did you. No bullets ever marred his perfect body, and no doubts ever assailed his mind.

Your mind.

"I'm not human," G.I. Joe says over the babble of the worshipers near you. His voice is loud and clear, and you glance around to see if anyone else has heard. But they are oblivious, wrapped up in their conversations,

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the way their presents lay wrapped at home.

"Neither was I," you say. Tammy looks up at you, her eyes questioning.

"What?" she says.

"I wasn't human," you say to G.I. Joe, and the admission feels like a confession, the voicing of a sin you've carried around for years. Tammy's face becomes uncertain, a little frightened to hear you talking to yourself, as if you really are crazy and need to be put into an asylum.

And maybe you are crazy.

"No crazier than you were before," Joe says.

It feels good to hear him say it. Better than the absolution given to you by the priest you talked to before coming home.

"Am I human now?" you ask, reaching for something certain, anything solid you can grab hold of and hang on to.

"Mom . . .," Tammy whispers.

"Shhh," Mom says, "he's praying."

"You're in pain, aren't you?" Joe says. "I don't feel a thing, even when I'm hanging up here. But you do."

"I wanted to kill," you say.

"But you didn't," Joe says.

"No," you say, wishing that you had. It would make life easier. That is at the heart of it, you realize — that you wish you had killed to spare yourself the embarrassment you feel now, to share in the homecoming nearly every other soldier received — and you don't know how to wash that away.

Hot tears burn your cheeks, an absurd mixture of shame and guilt blurring the image of Joe and the congregation in front of you.

"Sometimes you have to kill," Joe says, parroting the drill instructors who molded him. "Otherwise you lose what you believe in."

You shake your head, remembering Stevie Walker's dull, startled eyes looking up into yours, refusing to close, to acknowledge death even after it had drained the life out of him.

"You know why I'm up here," Joe says. "I'm suffering for your sins so you won't have to. Everybody condemns war, but not the people who fight in them."

It should make you feel better. He's giving you a way to ease your conscience the way Christ did. But it doesn't. How many people have died in the name of Christ, you wonder, killed by the people who claimed to be

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saving them?

Like the Crusades. You too were a knight in shining armor, just like in the TV commercials. Polished steel, a white horse, and the same Islamic blood on your hands that the crusaders nine hundred years ago took home. Your fingers feel sticky where they grip the back of the pew in front of you and when you look down at your palms they are bright red.

Queasiness grips your stomach, the way it did in the field, and the walls of the church waver as you break out in a cold sweat.

"Mom . . .," Tammy whispers, staring in horror at your hands, at the frantic rubbing of one palm against the other as you try to scrape away the guilt oozing from them in crimson streaks.

The blood has stained the wood. You don't know if it's yours, from the rubbing, or that of your friend and the enemy soldiers who died. When you glance up you notice that Joe's palms are still flesh-tone clean, unlike your itching, wounded ones.

You hate him for that — his plastic skin that doesn't feel pain or bleed. The kind of skin you thought you had, impervious to shrapnel or self-mutilation. It's a lie, that skin, like everything that he represents — that you believed in.

Gritting your teeth, you clench your hands into fists and dig your fingernails into the already-torn skin, as if ripping your flesh away will free you of the burden you have no desire to carry.

Joe doesn't say anything. He just hangs there quietly, pretending to be Jesus the way you pretended to be G.I. Joe.

He's just a toy, you think suddenly, like Mr. Potato Head and the Transformer, brought to life by you.

So were you, you realize. A toy, brought to life by others.

Sick, your palms burning, you close your eyes, fighting back the tears you feel for Stevie, the dead Iraqis in their coffin tanks, and yourself.

Tonight is the first time you've cried since you were a kid, since becoming G.I. Joe and refusing to let yourself feel anything at all.

Proof finally, along with the blood, that you're not a toy anymore.

Your chest hurts. And when you open your eyes Joe is gone, and it's just you standing there, and although nothing is certain, not yet, you feel a little more solid, a little more human than the ghost you were.

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D. William Shunn is a 24 year-old documentation specialist at Wordperfect Corporation in Salt Lake City, Utah. In the past seven years, he has managed to hold a variety of jobs, from custard vendor to cabinet maker to night school English teacher. "At 17," he writes, "I was the baby of the 1985 Clarion Writers Workshop. I am also, as far as I know, the only missionary ever to be charged with terrorism in a Canadian court." "From Our Point of View, We Had Moved to the Left" centers around politics and presidential inaugurations. It also marks Bill's first professional short fiction sale.

From Our Point of View We Had Moved to the Left

By D. William Shunn

In the end I suppose it was nobody's fault, but the temptation to assign guilt remains great even today. Taking all the blame for ourselves is especially easy, painfully so. We were only kids then, of course, but we erased a man's career, a man's life. And in the same moment the face of an entire nation was changed. It leaves a powerful impression on a child to be part of such a thing.

Each time I learn of another quiet blacklisting, or disappearance, or imprisonment, I feel that same familiar burden of guilt drop onto my shoulders. The fact that it has become familiar does nothing to lessen its impact. It may be an irrational thought, but at such moments I can't shake the feeling that, had that first incident with Mr. Kemmelman never taken place, we might have been spared all the madness that has followed.

I believe the others feel the same way. We rarely speak of it, but I see

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it in their eyes.

We are haunted, all of us, by a misunderstanding.

It happened on a crisp winter day back in '09, the sun blazing high in a sky as blue as glacial ice. Thousands of shivering spectators thronged the Capitol grounds and the Mall beyond, spilling across Constitution Avenue on the north and Independence Avenue on the south. From our vantage to the left of the Presidential grandstand, the crowd seemed to stretch away like a vast sea, its surface crisscrossed by swells and surges that broke against the security cordon below us like surf against a desert island. The Washington Monument rose in the middle distance, stately and imposing even from Capitol Hill, while at the limits of our vision gleamed the quicksilver waters of the Potomac. History was in the making that day, bearing us along like the barges on that river—but only a few of those present, I am certain, could have foreseen the black waters ahead.

A stirring march from the Marine Corps Band, seated on risers to the right of the grandstand, blared across the Mall from floating loudspeakers arrayed in a broad grid above the crowd. Our choral director, Mr. Kemmelman, tramped back and forth through the snow before our own risers in a rhythm at odds with the music, his heavy face creased in a frown. Inscrutable Secret Service agents rimmed the cordoned area like stone sentries, on occasion speaking into their wrist radios, while harried White House personnel scurried to and fro on obscure errands. Mr. Kemmelman's pacing hardly stood out amid all that organized chaos, but we in the choir sensed it keenly.

An intense, brooding cloud hung over our director. This, together with the fear, the respect, and even the love with which we regarded him, only tightened our own nerves like piano wire. "I wish he'd sit down," I whispered. "He's making me nervous."

I was squeezed onto the risers between my friends Charlie and Hughie. Charlie nodded, narrowed his dark eyes, and said, "Know what he looks like, Ben?"

"No, what?"

"A big melted candle. With legs."

He was right. We had seen old photographs hanging on the walls of Mr. Kemmelman's office, portraying a large young man with a square face, its features blunt as if hewn from stone. Dark, slightly protuberant eyes lent

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that young man the deceptive aspect of a droop-lidded hound, and thick curly hair the color of peanut butter matted his head. In the time since those photographs had been taken, however, age had treated the man before us as flame might treat a fat tallow candle. With his chin pressed down to his collar, his jowls lay in folds about his jaw like layered wax drippings. His heavy cheeks sagged like empty pouches, and his sad, baggy eyes seemed in danger of sliding down his face. His forehead was smooth as bone, as if scoured clean by wind and rain. The effect of all this, together with his pacing, was one of subdued urgency. I imagined him anxiously trying to finish his day's business before bubbling down into a shapeless puddle of wax.

"A candle?" I said. "You think?"

"Yep," said Charlie, straightening the cuffs of his school blazer. "Picture him with his hair on fire and you'll see what I mean."

Hughie clawed at his face and rolled his eyes back into his head. "Help me, I'm melting, *mellll*-ting! *Aaaah*!"

Our little friend Slapjack craned his head around in the next row, giggling uncontrollably. Slapjack was younger than most of the choir and he never talked much, but he would laugh at just about anything. We were all fond of him, and we regarded him like a mascot. His giggles were infectious. I found myself laughing along with him—I and several other boys.

Mr. Kemmelman looked up sharply. "Find your centers, gentlemen," he said in a stern hiss. "This is the real thing. Ground yourselves." After a moment's cold gaze he resumed his patrol, glancing around as if someone might have overheard the reprimand.

We lapsed into a guilty silence, chastened.

None of us was older than ten.

The band music ended with a sudden grand flourish, a wall of reverberation lingering in the air like a gunshot. As the white-gloved Marines snapped their instruments down to rest, a thunderclap of applause erupted from the crowd, sudden as the onslaught of a winter storm.

The sun had reached its zenith in the sky. I checked my watch. High noon.

Every administration places its own stamp on the inaugural celebration, some symbolic embodiment of its philosophies. In '77, rather than ride in the Presidential limousine, Jimmy Carter chose to walk the full

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length of Pennsylvania Avenue as proof that he was one with the common man. Mario Cuomo kept the festivities in '97 to a bare minimum, as befitted the dignity and solitude of the Presidency. And in preparation for Tuesday, January 20, 2009, John Isaiah Wheelock, champion of the New Right, had spared no expense in creating the most extravagant display of red-white-and-blue-blooded nationalism since the Bicentennial.

Which was where the Nathaniel Hawthorne Memorial Boys' Academy Concert choir of North Andelain, New Hampshire, fit into the picture.

On the Presidential grandstand, Chief Justice David Souter, swathed in black robes, stepped to the podium to say a few words in honor of Phyllis Whitely, the lame-duck president. I was distracted from Souter's remarks, however, by all the Secret Service agents in sight, so self-possessed in their dark suits and sunglasses. It took me back to Hawthorne Memorial, the first Wednesday in November, when I had seen my first Secret Service agents in the flesh.

It was the morning after Election Day, and we were truant from choir practice. Four strong, we skittered down the halls of Nathaniel Hawthorne like a squad of miniature commandos, Charlie at point, Hughie and I in the middle, and Slapjack bringing up the rear, one hand over his mouth to stifle his giggles. A door creaked open somewhere in the dim, vaulted corridor, and we dodged around a corner, laboring to breathe quietly until we heard it close again. Slapjack's cheeks were puffed out and he was nearly doubled over with the effort of holding his laughter in. When Charlie cuffed him on the side of the head, the poor kid almost lost control.

"Not a peep, I told you," said Charlie. "That dumb-ass giggling is going to get us all busted."

I shushed Charlie and his foul mouth as firmly as if we were in Sunday services. "*You're* the one who's going to get us all busted," I said, "dragging us out of class like this." I had followed willingly enough, but now I was having definite second thoughts.

"Yeah," said Hughie, "but at least he'll get us busted with some style."

Only a few minutes before, two men in dark suits had entered the choral chamber. We were rehearsing a chorale entitled Requiem. And Mr. Kemmelman was clearly unhappy about the interruption. After the men had spoken to him, though, he turned his baton over to the class president and accompanied the men out. He told us he would be back soon, and he instructed us to ground ourselves and keep on practicing as if nothing had

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happened.

Almost immediately, Charlie had grabbed my arm, said, "Let's go, Ben," and tugged me out the door along with him. Hughie had followed, with Slapjack trailing in his wake like a happy puppy. The choral chamber with its hundred-odd boys was in an uproar. It didn't take a quantum physicist to know that those had been Secret Service agents.

We were all a little dazed in the aftermath of the general election, now that a possibility which had seemed so remote only six months before had actually come to pass. Running on his reactionary New Right platform, Senator Jack Wheelock, Hawthorne Memorial's most distinguished alumnus, had edged out both the incumbent Democrat and her Republican challenger to claim the Presidency. Wheelock had served for years as a member of the Academy's Board of Trustees, and we knew from dusty old annuals that he and Mr. Kemmelman had graduated together from Hawthorne in the class of '68. These facts, plus the presence of men in dark suits, told us that our director's old classmate may have dropped by for a chat.

Our brief rest ended. Charlie gestured for us to move on. This was not something to miss.

We flung ourselves down the next hallway and around another corner, where we halted at the sound of an outside door closing somewhere up ahead. A bank of tall Gothic windows overlooked the front grounds of the Academy, and through them in the distance we could see the thickly forested White Mountains with their fresh mantle of snow. Below us in the wide, circular driveway idled a shiny black limousine. Off to the left stood our chorister with his two escorts. One of them pointed him toward the limo.

"Did you see the size of the iron that guy's packing?" whispered Charlie. "That was at *least* a .38 he had strapped in his armpit. One of those could put a hole in you the size of a grapefruit."

"With Slapjack, there wouldn't be anything left to bury," said Hughie. "Hey, do you think we could send him out to eavesdrop?"

Slapjack shrank back, shaking his head. He did not laugh.

"Look, guys!" I said. "Look!"

As Mr. Kemmelman neared the limousine, its driver held open the passenger door, and John Isaiah Wheelock emerged into the cold.

We pressed our faces to the windows like kids at a candy shop. The man

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below us was not classically handsome, but his features were strong and arresting, a crown of neat salt-and-pepper hair lending him an air of distinction. Blue shadow stubbled his cheeks, deep lines ran past the sides of his mouth, and crow's feet crinkled at the corners of his eyes. He was rugged, like the distant mountains, as much at home in the outdoors as he was in his expensive clothing. I felt drawn to him — but as he shook hands with Mr. Kemmelman and perfunctorily embraced him, something inside me drew back. His smile did not belong to a man. It belonged to a predator.

"Here it comes," said Hughie. "Kemmelman's about to get torn a new hole for making us sing in Latin."

Slapjack giggled, but I doubt he knew of Jack Wheelock's opposition to the bill which would have made Spanish our country's second official language. Wheelock had promised, in fact, that he would require all welfare applicants to demonstrate intermediate English-language proficiency before they could receive any benefits. Anything to keep the mother tongue pure.

Our director and the President-Elect stood talking for several minutes in the chill wind. Wheelock wore a fur-trimmed overcoat and leather gloves. Mr. Kemmelman, shivering, wore an old cardigan. The expressions on Wheelock's face were animated and forceful, but Mr. Kemmelman's face remained as stone throughout the conversation.

Watching, I was filled with a revulsion for Jack Wheelock as deep as any I have had for him since. My parents had taught me that he was an enemy. They published a small newspaper in Maine, and they had opposed his candidacy from the start. Anti-Wheelock propaganda had surrounded me at home — but I feel strongly that my revulsion that day was instinctual rather than learned.

Wheelock signaled his driver. Before getting into the limousine, he laid a hand on Mr. Kemmelman's shoulder, his face deadly sober. My stomach knotted, and my fists pressed against the window pane.

As the President-Elect spoke, Hughie began to mimic him in a pretentious New England accent: "Now I trust," he said, as Wheelock's teeth flashed ominously in the shadow of his face, "that you're through poisoning the precious bodily fluids of these fine young boys with all that heathen Roman claptrap. You won't disappoint me."

Slapjack started laughing so hard that he smacked his forehead against the glass, and I was sure anyone within a mile's radius could have heard

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it. One of the Secret Service agents looked up in our direction, reaching for the bulge in his armpit. Charlie clamped a hand over Slapjack's mouth and dragged him down to the floor, where we sat with our pulses racing.

Charlie counted to three and we made a break for it.

It was in Plymouth, New Hampshire — only a short drive from north Andelain — that Nathaniel Hawthorne died in 1864. He passed away in his sleep, on a trip to the White Mountains with his good friend Franklin Pierce, the nation's fourteenth president. I have a disquieting feeling that the foothills of the White Mountains may not be the most propitious location for associating with presidents. Nathaniel Hawthorne . . . Horace Kemmelman . . . Now my own turn has come and gone. I do not find the historical precedent encouraging.

We beat Mr. Kemmelman back to the choral chamber by several minutes. When he arrived, he took up his baton with no greetings, no fanfare, no explanations. "Gentlemen, let us please take the *Requiem* from the beginning, with — the center section taking the first parts."

Mr. Kemmelman believed that his students should learn multiple voices for each piece and be able to perform any of them on demand, even in concert. We sang our assigned parts strongly that day in rehearsal, with passion and precision, but as we navigated the trickiest passages of the *Requiem*, Mr. Kemmelman's face became clouded and he lowered his baton. Silent, we awaited correction.

He looked up, but from the beseeching expression in his eyes I realized that he was troubled by something from beyond the classroom. "Gentlemen," he said, and for the first time I recognized how yellowed his hair had become in comparison to the old photographs, "you have been invited to perform on the twentieth of January in Washington, D.C. — at the inauguration of your new president." He took a deep breath. "On your behalf I have accepted the invitation."

An incredulous murmur arose. Mr. Kemmelman's gaze panned across the choir almost apologetically, as if seeking absolution. "Tomorrow we begin rehearsal. We will perform a number by Irving Berlin that most of you already know, 'God Bless America.' The arrangement I will write myself. Come prepared to work." He surveyed us again. "Let us dismiss for the day."

No one spoke or stood up to leave. Mr. Kemmelman moved around his music stand and stood before us with his arms open. "Solidarity, gentlemen," he said, "solidarity."

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We young boys, one hundred twelve of us, rose as one and surged together into his embrace as we did at the close of every practice session, but never had we done it with so little reluctance, such total immersion. We were awed, honored—but more than that it was our inexplicable fear that caused us to huddle together so passionately that afternoon.

And so it was that Inauguration Day found our choir crammed onto a set of irregular risers that seemed designed more to conform to the side of Capitol Hill than to accommodate a group of performers. We were forced to rearrange ourselves as we tried to find places to sit, and Charlie and I and several others ended up displaced from our accustomed center section. In fact, a great number of us were shifted into new positions, which only made us feel out of place and increased our anxiety.

Mr. Kemmelman continued to pace, which did not help.

Chief Justice Souter closed his remarks and asked John Isaiah Wheelock to rise. As the President-Elect approached the dais the vast crowd seemed to swell, like a tide groping for the moon. I find myself wondering today where all the protesters were—where the signs and the placards and the indignant voices had taken refuge. They had turned out in force for Phyllis Whitely's inauguration. Why was no one protesting *this*?

Mr. Kemmelman had once been a protestor, as I have learned from various sources at the Hawthorne Academy. He once led faculty opposition to many of the policies of the Board of Trustees, and when most of the Board had wanted him terminated, it was Jack Wheelock who had saved him. Wheelock had persuaded the Board that it was better to grant the faculty a few concessions than to risk creating a martyr.

Now Mr. Kemmelman was a player in Wheelock's inauguration, about to demonstrate to the nation the depths of his support for the new president. This is what becomes of protestors in the new America. A way is found to turn them. The lucky ones, that is.

All the October polls had showed Wheelock behind. According to the media, there was no way he could win—but then he did win, decisively. He found the support he needed when he needed it, in places no one else had thought to look, and this leads me to a heretical thought:

Perhaps the framers of the Constitution were more correct than we would care to admit when they designed the Electoral College to keep power *away* from the people.

* * *

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John Isaiah Wheelock stood before the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court like a mooring post for our eyes and expectations. Remote holocameras from the major cable companies drifted in loose ranks about the Presidential grandstand like a flock of hovering raptors. Mr. Kemmelman readied his baton, his face a study in severe control, and we felt a thrill of adrenaline. The downbeat would come the moment our new president completed his Oath of Office.

Jack Wheelock raised his right arm.

I should have been concentrating on Mr. Kemmelman, on finding my center, on grounding myself for our performance, but instead my eyes were locked on Wheelock—on his right arm, bent at the elbow like a carpenter's square to form a perfect ninety-degree angle.

A right angle. His right arm.

I was ten years old. I was only beginning to grasp the significance of right and left.

We had thrashed it out one evening shortly after the election. Charlie and I shared a room in the dormitories, and that night Hughie had joined us to prepare for a civics exam. We were studying the important political events of the Sixties, and mentions of a "New Left movement" had cropped up in the text. "What the hell is this left and right business?" said Charlie. "It doesn't make any sense."

"That's to be expected," I said. I was sitting on my bed with several hoarded pillows propped behind me, and I stroked my chin just like our civics instructor did when preparing to make a significant point. "My dad always says that English is the most ambiguous language there is."

Hughie pulled a face. "Then would you mind speaking it."

"Well, how many different things can right mean?" I said. "You've got right and wrong . . . right answers . . . right of way . . ."

"Right angles in geometry," said Hughie.

"There's the Bill of Rights," said Charlie. "And children's rights, too."

"And then there's voodoo rites," said Hughie.

I sighed and rolled my eyes.

"Okay, what about left?" said Charlie.

"Left out," I said. "Left behind. Leftovers."

"Out in left field," said Hughie. He grinned weakly. "Not a good place to be."

"You know," I said, recalling discussions I had overheard between my

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parents, "my dad says that liberals get a bad name just because people are prejudiced against the left. Not that left is actually *bad*—he says we only think that way because most of us are right-handed."

"So then left-wingers are liberals," said Hughie.

"More or less, I think."

"And right-wingers would be conservatives," he said.

"Liberals and conservatives," said Charlie. I could tell he was trying to keep things straight in his head. "Okay, if that's left and right, then what about the people in the middle of the road?"

"We call them roadkill," said Hughie.

I tried not to laugh, but Charlie looked like someone who had been clinging to an expensive vase with sweaty fingers and had just watched it slip and shatter. "Shit," he said, wearily but with venom.

Charlie's swearing made me squirm. My mother had always taught me that vulgar words were what lazy people used to make up for a limited vocabulary. But Charlie's father was a decorated officer from the bloody Second Persian Gulf War, and his children had learned differently.

"Shit what?" said Hughie with some hesitancy, looking to me as if I were Charlie's oracle.

"Shit you bug me sometimes, Hubert Rosenthal," said Charlie. "You *really* bug me."

Hughie frowned, and the corner of his mouth trembled a little. "My name's not Hubert," he said.

"You're right," I said, sensing a rare opening. "Hughie's short for humongous wiener."

"Isn't that a term from the Latin?" said Charlie.

But Hughie was looking at me in some kind of betrayed shock, as if I had just pulled a dagger out of his back. "At least I'm not named after a *traitor*—Mr. Benedict Arnold Bigmouth!" he said in a thick voice, then ran from the room.

We sat in silence for several moments. The slamming of the door rang in my ears. "*He* sure left in a hurry," said Charlie.

"Right," I said, feeling injury and guilt run together.

Charlie lay back casually on his bed. "No big deal, though," he said.

"Some people just can't take a joke, you know?"

Charlie's words stuck in my head as I watched Jack Wheelock and David Souter together on the Presidential grandstand. The clear, cold air was

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heavy with anticipation, the crowd clinging to the moment like barnacles to some great ship. Mr. Kemmelman stood like a figure carved in wood. The only sign of life he showed was in the hard, focused set of his eyes.

Some people can't take a joke. I know this well, much to my dismay.

The clear, deliberate voice of the Chief Justice split the air: "I do solemnly affirm—" The words startled me, rolling over the crowd like a blast of thunder.

"I do solemnly affirm—" repeated John Isaiah Wheelock.

A constrictive panic rose in my chest. Mr. Kemmelman was poised as menacingly and impassively as a stone gargoyle. Charlie and all the other boys around me, none of us in our proper, familiar places, seemed to press in on me like the crush of hot bodies in a gas chamber. I scanned every face I could see, but all seemed unconcerned, oblivious. Looking back, I wonder who might have spoken out that day had our choir not done so.

"—that I will faithfully execute—"

"—that I will faithfully execute—"

These were the terrifying voices of twin titans. The President-Elect had always been quick to point out his direct descent from Eleanor Wheelock, the Congregationalist minister who founded Dartmouth College. The Wheelocks, Jack claimed—and, by extension, himself—were part of the warp and woof of American history, part of the nation's destiny. What he failed to mention, however, was that the original Wheelock had resorted to fraud in order to attract funding for Dartmouth. He claimed the new school was meant to educate the local Indians, when in reality he intended it only to produce more congregationalist ministers. There is nothing new under the sun.

"—the Office of President of the United States—"

"—the Office of President of the United States—"

Wheelock claimed his party would restore America's moral and patriotic fiber, reestablish her as the world leader in commerce and industry. But what we have now is a quiet, pervasive police state, a great octopus with its tentacles strangling every one of our rights. Our courts and legislatures are engaged in a slow dismantling of the Constitution. With each successive Congress, our freedoms are whittled away as surely as small knives can in time reduce a two-by-four to toothpicks.

"—and will to the best of my ability—"

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"—and will to the best of my ability—"

Analysts now call Jack Wheelock's election to the Presidency reactionary in nature. Democrats had been in power for twelve years, both in the White House and on Capitol Hill. The country was no better for it. We were ready for a savior. But the ensuing mad dash to conservatism left our country tilting farther to the right than it had ever tilted before.

"—preserve, protect, and defend—"

"—preserve, protect, and defend—"

Was it only my fevered imagination, or was that a trace of distaste on the Chief Justice's face? Did Souter perhaps foresee what was to come, and was he sick with despair at setting that evil machinery into motion?

"—the Constitution of the United States."

Mr. Kemmelman came to life, like an iceberg flash-thawed. "The section on the right will begin," he hissed. "On the *right*. Ready?

Jack Wheelock's voice rang out with the finality of a death knell: "—the Constitution of the United States."

I wanted to scream.

But there, in the split-second of silence before cheering and wild applause could erupt, flashed Mr. Kemmelman's baton, insistent as an icepick, signaling the onset of the magnificent canon he had crafted from the strains of "God Bless America."

And the downbeat fell, precise as surgical steel.

Some of us opened our mouths. Some of us did not. Some of us managed to croak out a ragged opening note before glancing around in sick confusion and falling silent.

A funereal stillness ensued. We faced an audience of a million staring corpses. Cold hands squeezed my heart.

But things still might have turned out all right if not for what happened next. It was something any other president could have shrugged off, forgiven of a hundred or so small boys. Ronald Reagan, a product of the entertainment industry, would have understood. I'm sure either one of the Roosevelts would have just smiled and signaled for us to have another go at it, chomping on a thick cigar or clenching a thin cigarette holder between gleaming teeth. I can picture Abraham Lincoln patting each one of us on the head, unbearable depths of sympathy in his sad, dark eyes. We would all have been changed men had Lincoln been with us.

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But this was John Isaiah Wheelock. To him we were not small boys. We were mere symbols in his thrall.

Now President of the United States, Wheelock glared at us in that interminable moment with eyes that burned an angry demon's. The crowd, the cameras, the Secret Service cordon, all seemed to vanish like smoke, the way dreams flee at the cold touch of reality. The world had narrowed down to just us and our president—a pitiful army of children facing a modern Goliath.

Mr. Kemmelman seemed to me suddenly a fragile marionette, suspended between warring puppeteers. He looked old and very brittle.

Only a few seconds passed in that horrible silence, but it felt like eternity, a soundless freefall through ice.

Someone began to laugh, and the freefall ended with a sickening jolt. I spat the only word I could find: "Shit."

It was Slapjack—God keep his soul—defending us against the President's baleful anger the only way he knew how, with the only weapon he owned for warding off what he did not understand. His was not merry laughter, not delighted laughter, not the laughter of relief, but rather terrified, hysterical laughter, too shrill by several degrees to be mistaken for an outpouring of joy or mirth. It clawed its way into the still air like some ferocious infant dragon, ripping itself free of the birth canal and fighting to gain a purchase on the sky with its still moist wings. Slapjack's eyes were wide, as if he were helpless to quell that ghastly sound.

And we, his classmates, laughed along with him. A few nervous titters broke out at first, but those quickly expanded into full-throated gales, and in a few moments we were holding our sides, writhing in our seats like a bunch of weak-kneed kindergartners, tears streaming down our faces.

It wasn't at all funny. There was not one blasted funny thing about the entire situation. We were honored guests at the Presidential inauguration, and we had just blown our golden moment in the spotlight before the most powerful men in the country, before foreign dignitaries, before a gathered crowd of thousands and thousands, before the disbelieving eyes and ears of millions of Americans, before the microphones and cameras of the entire world—so what else was there to do but laugh, and laugh like raving lunatics?

Our laughter multiplied and echoed back from the floating loudspeakers, from the mausoleum-white marble of the Capitol, from the monu-

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ments all down the Mall, as if a horde of demons were descending on the city. Mr. Kemmelman stood frozen, arms still raised, with the faintly surprised air of a man just impaled on a spear. His eyes betrayed only disbelief.

Then the laughter spread to the crowd.

I will not attempt to describe any more of it here. Every news outlet in the country has it on tape in three-dimensional surround. The only way to know how it really felt is to have been there in person, but the tapes come close. I know. I've reviewed them often enough.

Chaos reigned for a minute or two, but after a few stern words from Chief Justice Souter, order was restored. We were even given a chance to try our number again, and we did a respectable job of it. It didn't make us feel any better, though. We had already upstaged ourselves, and no performance, no matter how good, could make up for that.

But we had also upstaged the President of the United States. After that first horrible instant, he had managed to mask his true emotions, but we weren't fooled. He smiled graciously as we pushed through our number, but from that smile shone malice as pure as beams of black light. We had laughed at his inauguration, and from his point of view I'm sure he felt we were laughing at him.

But time marches on, as inexorably as the parade which soon installed Jack Wheelock in his new home at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Twelve years have passed, and he has been laughing at the rest of us ever since. My parents eke out a meager subsistence back home in Maine, two old reporters whose liberal press was forced suddenly into closure nearly a decade ago. Charlie's father, once a critic of military rearmament, has not been heard from in seven years. Hughie's mother is dead, killed in religious violence in the streets of New York City. His family had never been practicing Jews, but strangely enough now they are, covertly.

The source of the laughter is dead, as well. In his first year at Harvard, the black depression which had been creeping over Slapjack for years at last reached its high tide. I suspect it was Charlie who sold him the gun—from his missing father's collection, perhaps—though I'm sure Charlie supposed it was intended for a very different purpose.

We left Washington that day in three chartered buses bound straight for North Andelain, New Hampshire. Mr. Kemmelman stayed on, supposedly to attend the Inaugural Ball as a special guest of the President. None

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of us ever saw him again. We finished out the term with a substitute teacher, and by early spring a full-time replacement had been named. No one offered us an explanation.

When I think of Mr. Kemmelman now, I try to remember the stern, generous man who strove to embrace us all that day back in our choral chamber, but whose arms turned out to be too short. I try to remember him that way, but all too often what I see is his heavy, slightly stunned face congealing into horror as our laughter rolls past him in ugly waves—and then I realize, once more but never with any less force, that it was we children, we small boys, who laughed him into nonexistence.

I am back in Washington today—Wednesday, January 20, 2021. The occasion is Jack Wheelock's fourth inauguration. I attend Dartmouth, and I have begun my student teaching at the Nathaniel Hawthorne Memorial Boy's Academy. By a peculiar twist of fate, I have drawn the same duty forced upon Mr. Kemmelman some twelve long years ago. My boys are here with me, crowded onto ill-sized risers adjoining the Presidential grandstand. The day is again cold and clear. President Wheelock has waited all this time for our choir to reattain its former level of excellence, and he is determined that we serve him today with fierce allegiance—as if that will undo the affront of so long ago.

Charlie and Hughie are here somewhere also—perhaps as part of the crowd, perhaps atop one of the nearby buildings, or perhaps in some cunning disguise inside the security cordon. I prefer not to know where. For their part, they are determined that Jack Wheelock not be allowed to serve a fourth term. For my part, I am determined only to draw from my boys the most haunting and plaintive music that has ever been heard in this city which was once the cradle of democracy.

I am determined to give Mr. Kemmelman, wherever he is, the performance we failed to deliver that Tuesday in '09.

Everyone will be waiting for another colossal blunder. They will be waiting for us to disgrace ourselves again, to humiliate our president, but we will not. We will sing like angels, and we will seize the minds and souls of all within the sound of our voices. They will hear, see, and feel nothing else but our music. And when the shots ring out, to signal the end of an era, we will not miss a beat, and the strains of Horace Kemmelman's magnificent arrangement of "God Bless America" will wash out over the

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Mall like a cool breeze from heaven. It may be the last song I ever hear, but my boys will make me proud. And I will be happy.

There is something my parents never understood about America. It is that America only understands itself. It knows little of anything else, and what it does know it comprehends poorly. My parents named me Benedict—from the Latin for *good word*, or *good saying*, or even *good voice* — for they hoped I might someday write or speak with a powerful voice in defense of all that is good about this nation. But they made a mistake. In this country, even among those who know nothing else of American history, the name Benedict is associated with one thing only: treason.

And perhaps a traitor is what I am. Perhaps that's what we all are. Who of you can blame us, though, for a certain amount of confusion that dark day twelve years ago? With the crowd, the cameras, the very weight of history hanging over our heads like some giant Damoclean sword, who can blame us for one small and treacherous mistake?

All it boiled down to was a breakdown of communication. Charlie and I and many of the others were used to being in the center section of the choir. When Mr. Kemmelman asked that the section to his right begin the canon, he was forgetting that many of us had shifted positions, and that from our point of view we had moved to the left.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

BOYS AND THEIR TOYS

AS ENTERTAINING as the film *Sneakers* was, and I did find it a thoroughly enjoyable way to wile away two hours, I left the theater after viewing it disappointed on several levels. The plot holes and sketchily developed characters constituted significant shortcomings. And I was sorry to see that director Phil Alden Robinson (who co-wrote *Sneakers* with Lawrence Lasker and Walter F. Parkes) never really came close to exploring the issues of privacy and Big Brother politics he and star Robert Redford consistently chatted about while promoting the film. And as a woman, I was more than a little frustrated by the (as per usual) lack of meaningful female roles.

Yet women have, I must admit, no place in a story like *Sneakers*. Like *WarGames*, a techno-thriller Lasker and Parkes also wrote, which pulled in a tidy sum back in 1983, *Sneakers* is a movie about boys and their toys. When a film's central relationship exists between males and machines, women characters seldom achieve status beyond decorative (and conveniently supportive) sidekick. So it is with both movies.

And, in cases like these, I am actually content to have it so. Adventures in cyberspace interest me very little. I am more interested in interpersonal interface. The movies about technology that interest me the most aren't really about electronic whizbang, they're about how technology affects the everday lives of everyday people.

The example I will cite (that will grant those among you who wish to term me a total reactionary full permission to do so) is the 1957 Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn romantic comedy entitled *Desk Set*. Written by Phoebe and Henry Ephron (Nora's folks) from a stageplay by William Marchant, and directed by Walter Lang, it tells the story of a group of reference librarians, led by Hepburn, who fear for

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their jobs when automation is introduced to their workplace. Tracy, as virile a prototype of the absent-minded computer nerd as you could wish for, plays the inventor behind EMMARAC (Electro-Magnetic Memory and Research Arithmetical Calculator).

This man is an unabashed technophile, proud as a papa of this computer of his. But Tracy spends little time with Miss EMMY (as "she" is called). Bless his heart, ole Spence finds Ms. Hepburn an even more stimulating companion. The blossoming of their very grown-up relationship is the core of the movie, around which secondary relationships with other suitors and co-workers is built. EMMY is a prop, not a presence.

The issues of technology that *Desk Set* touches on — technophobia and worker displacement — are as real today as they were then. In fact, *WarGames* dealt with some of these same problems. But the focus of the two movies is so different! In 26 years, the zeitgeist of movie romance seemed to shift from man-woman to boy-toy.

Matthew Broderick was literally a lad, a scrap of a high-schooler, when he played David Lightman, the hero of *WarGames*. Young David had problems coping with parents, teachers, and other teens, but his pc and modem were always there for him. Technology was no longer a tool for David, it was a way of life — and his primary relationship. Unhealthy, in more ways than one. Unlike the women of *Desk Set* who want to find a way to co-exist with the computer, David wants to find a way to dominate it.

All this reminds me of what some philosophers have observed about the divergent female and male approaches to nature. You know, all that stuff about women being attuned to the cycles, while men are control-freaks. It seems to me that Moby Dick won more battles in the old-time stories than HAL has in modern-day movies. But I suppose that makes sense, in a Genesis kinda way. Nature begot man, but man begot the computer.

But he created it in his own likeness. Which accounts for why technology so often takes on a power-hungry (if playful) personality in film. In *WarGames*, NORAD's War Operations Plan Response (WOPR) computer enjoys cybernetic competition even more than David, the boy who breaks into his nation's defense system thinking it's the new videogame product line of a toy company. And the whole suspense plot spins from the point when WOPR gleefully enters into a game of Global Thermonuclear War with David.

In *Desk Set*, Miss EMMY was a

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wall of flashing lights that went boop boop boop. I'd like to say that Hollywood has outgrown the silliness of making a mainframe light up like a Christmas tree by the time WOPR came along. Such is not the case. But besides the lights, WOPR came with a human (that is to say male) voice, and nifty peripherals like a triptych of three-story high video screens. A live-in amusement park with a mind of its own.

WOPR is the most interesting "character" in *WarGames*. *Sneakers* is a less effective film precisely because the central character — The Information Age — has no unique, tangible form. In *Sneakers*, there isn't *one* computer, there are scores of them. Plus enhanced phone systems, synthesizers, bugging devices, cameras, and elaborate ID apparatus, and every other electronic plaything, known or imagined.

Since Technology is given no true persona, the movie is forced to rely on its human characters to retain our interest. This is something *Sneakers* cannot consistently pull off, despite the substantial skill and charm of its large cast. Even very good actors can only do so much when the parts they're offered are stereotypes of spies, hackers, and phone-phreaks.

Robert Redford plays Bishop, a radical hacker of more than twenty years, who went underground and changed his name after escaping arrest in 1969 for a college prank, the wire transfer of monies from the Republican Party to the Black Panthers. His good buddy Cosmo (Ben Kingsley) was less lucky. He served hard time for his computer crimes, and is about to reappear in Marty Bishop's life in a most unsettling manner.

Bishop now heads a company of "sneakers," hackers who test a company's security by doing electronic b and e's of the firm's automated systems. His partners are Mother (Dan Ackroyd), a paranoid gadgeteer who has a conspiracy theory for every occasion; Whistler (David Strathairn), a blind audio whiz; Carl (River Phoenix), the team's token youthful nerd, who twiches and perspires a lot; and Crease (Sidney Poitier), a career operative of the CIA forced out of the Company into the company of what in real life are called "penetration testers." (How's *that* for a gender-evocative bit of nomenclature?)

A cast with a median age of 40-something should make *Sneakers* a more adult movie. (Now that the film's trio of screenwriters are no longer boy wonders themselves, they probably wanted to create an ensemble they could relate to.) But chronological age isn't everything.

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From the looks of them, lead characters played by Robert Redford and Sidney Poitier are more likely to read *Modern Maturity* than Mondo *2000*, and heaven knows these guys have always been wholesome and well fed. It seems ridiculous to term them, as many reviewers have, "cyberpunks." But Cyber-Pans may come little closer to the mark. Although this band of cheerful, competent computer professionals look like middle-aged men, their inordinate love of high-tech gadgets and gotta-win game-playing indicates that they've never *really* grown up. They are a new generation of Lost Boys.

This is something Liz (Mary McDonnell), the movie's closest thing to a female lead, alludes to in her only interesting line. She currently works as a piano teacher at a school for exceptional kiddies. But the only thing we *really* need to know about Liz is that she used to be Bishop's lover. He comes to her for help. At first, she (wisely) wants nothing more to do with him. "I have a new group of gifted children now," she informs him. "And I like the fact that they're under 30."

However, it matters little what Liz likes or doesn't like. Bishop's band of merry men needs their Maid Marion back. Especially since a woman is needed as sex bait for one of the bad guys. (She may be brainy, but her role still relegates her to sex object.)

The villains of this particular piece may be connected to the Government, the mafia, or some combination of the two. (A mad scientist is also part of the mix.) All Bishop knows is that two men claiming to be agents of the National Security Agency have blown his long-kept cover. They blackmail him and his crew into helping the NSA steal from its inventor the ultimate McGuffin — a "black box" that can quickly break *any* computer code.

The fact that *Sneakers*' plot revolves around some magical object makes it just another holy grail caper flick. Only these days the master thieves are more interested in a handful of wires and a silicon chip than they are in the lost ark or the crown jewels.

I wish that *Sneakers* could have managed to be less ordinary. More fully-realized characters would have helped. I would have been more enthusiastic if it had said something meaningful about the issues of privacy and information access that the filmmakers *claimed* to be writing about. That black box of theirs was just mumbo-jumbo. It may be a real issue that our national computer systems are less than secure. (*Computerworld* reported last fall that hackers from Holland "ran-

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sacked" DOD computers containing sensitive files of the "Persian Gulf war.") But the fact is that more Americans are concerned about TRW spreading false credit reports about them, or (as was rumored last year) computer networks like Prodigy accessing and collecting personal information from client files.

If this cautionary tale of life in the computer culture had taken a more personal (and more practical) slant, it would have been even more fun to watch. *Sneakers* is an agreeable, if pointless exercise in high-tech chicanery. Although refreshingly devoid of cheap sex and senseless bloodshed, it is nonetheless a rather juvenile example of the filmmaker's art: a geriatric version of yet another banal yarn about boys and their toys.

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I don't often find good, humorous science fiction, and this time it comes from an unusual source. Jerry Oltion is known for his serious hard science fiction. He has published three novels and a number of short stories in Analog *and* Pulphouse. *He won* Analog's *Reader's Choice Award for his story, "The Love Song of Laura Morrison." "The Grass is Always Greener" is science fiction, but Jerry wrote it with his tongue planted firmly in his cheek. He has taken the popular alternate universe theory and made it — well, let's just say he's taken it personally.*

The Grass Is Always Greener

By Jerry Oltion

THE PARTY was full of computer nuts. Tall, slender, most of them with short hair, *all* of them in T-shirts, Levi's, and tennis shoes; they had collected in a knot around the punch bowl and were swapping stories about their systems. They looked like your usual crowd of hacker nerds — except they were all me.

Another crowd had gathered around the astronaut. The fireman and the cop were both there, and the newspaper reporter was embarrassing all three of them by taking pictures of them side by side while the rest of the group (mostly printers and writers and book dealers) hooted and laughed. They were all me, too.

I was sitting at a table with a land surveyor, a city landfill manager, and a radio disc-jockey, also all me. We were looking at the focus of the biggest crowd of all and not saying much.

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Straight, dark hair down to the middle of her back, wide shoulders, narrow hips; she enjoyed being the center of attention. I thought, perhaps uncharitably, that she probably wasn't the center very often, but here she was sure to be. She wasn't a knockout, but she was pretty, six feet tall, and had a nice figure, which was enough for this crowd and she knew it. She should. Afterall, she was me, too.

"I wonder who'll wind up in the sack with her tonight," the deejay said.

The surveyor said, "Come off it. We're not the type. *She's* not the type."

"Never whacked off before?" the landfill manager asked, and we all laughed. From the nervous shifting of my companions' eyes, I was willing to bet that we were all thinking of the same incident: when Dad had walked in on us in the bathroom when we were fifteen.

But this was different. I said as much.

"Sure it is," said the deejay. "So are you willing to bet money she'll sleep alone?"

"No," I admitted. Hell, there was no point in lying. I'd have gone to bed with her myself if I'd thought I had a chance, but a house-husband isn't exactly competition for an astronaut. Or even a pack of computer nerds.

Jesus, I thought. Feeling jealous of yourself. What a jerk. It didn't help that there were forty-nine other selves there to feel jealous of, either. I downed my beer (the bar had only one brand, Henry Weinhard's, but nobody had complained) and thought about going for another.

I looked back over at the female version of myself. Beside her, a smaller focus of attention within her larger sphere of influence, stood the me who had organized this little reunion. Like the rest of us, he was about six feet tall, thin, dark-haired, had bushy eyebrows and an oversize nose, and he didn't know what to do with his hands when he talked. Like at least half of us there, he had the hand that wasn't holding a drink jammed into a pants pocket, playing with change or car keys or whatever. He didn't look like a billionaire, but then I don't really know what a billionaire should look like, so maybe he did. Which meant we all did, though only he had the credit to back it up.

I don't know if it really costs a hundred thousand bucks to poke a hole between alternate universes, or if the price has been set artificially high to discourage emigration to the worlds on the lucky end of the bell curve, but whatever the reason, the billionaire had bought round-trip tickets for all of us. Five million dollars to hold a cocktail party in a roomful of

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mirrors without the mirrors.

There'd been plenty of speculation about why he'd done it, but so far nobody had come up with a reason any better than "just because," which was what he'd been telling anyone who asked. If I'd had a few million dollars to play with I might have thrown the party myself, so it seemed believable enough.

He noticed me watching him. He looked away and so did I, so I was surprised to see him standing beside me a minute later with a fresh beer in his hand. He set it down in front of me and sat in the empty chair beside me, saying, "I noticed you were out."

"Thanks." I took a sip from the frosty bottle. Looking beyond it at him, I noticed the adhesive convention badge on his shirt pocket: *Hi, my name's Michael.* Ha.

"So which ones are you guys again?" he asked. "I keep getting us mixed up."

"House-husband," I said.

"Surveyor," the me on my right said. "Deejay," the deejay said. "Garbage man," the landfill manager said.

The billionaire grinned. "No hokey 'sanitation engineer' crap for you, eh?"

"Nope."

"I remember that summer driving the garbage truck," the billionaire said. "Best job I ever had. So you went back to it?"

The garbageman smiled. He was missing a tooth. "Not exactly. I rolled the damn truck. I was drunk when I rolled it, and Dirty Bill didn't have it insured, so the judge gave me a choice. I could either buy Bill a new truck and work for him for two years to pay off the loan, or spend two years in the slam for DUI. I picked two years driving a new truck. Bill died after a year and a half, and I inherited the business. The rest is history."

"Ah, so you split off the main track in . . . what, '86?"

"That's right. Never went to college. Never met this Karen everybody's talking about. Married Cindy Collins instead."

Cindy Collins had been our high school sweetheart. The billionaire got a dreamy look in his eyes and asked, "So how is she?"

"I'm not complaining," the garbage man said. The surveyor and the deejay both laughed, and I realized there had been another interpretation to the question.

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The billionaire laughed too, belatedly, then turned to me. "Househusband, eh?" he asked. "Your Karen works?"

"I didn't marry Karen, either. My wife's named Sonja."

"Sonja? I don't even *know* a Sonja."

"Sure you do. She was one of Karen's friends in college. Maybe an inch taller than Karen, long, dark hair, high cheekbones . . .?"

"Hmm." The billionaire's puzzlement suddenly blinked out, and he got dreamy-eyed again. "Oh, right, *now* I remember. How could I forget? God, I had the hots for her. Never had the guts to ask her out, though. How'd you work up the courage?"

I smiled. "Accident. Remember that day you and Karen were making love in her dorm room and Sonja came by? In your universe — and in everybody else's I've talked to here so far — she rattled the knob and then knocked when she found it was locked, right?"

The others were all smiling. The billionaire said, "Yeah, I remember. We kept making love while she knocked, and eventually she decided nobody was home and went away."

"Right. But in *my* universe we'd left the door unlocked."

"Oh!"

"That's what Sonja said, too, just before she tossed off her clothes and joined us."

"You're kidding."

"Not a bit."

"God, you had the two of them together?" He laughed nervously. I supposed he was wondering how he'd have handled the situation.

Well he might. That had been the moment of our divergence. In one wild afternoon in a college dorm I'd lost most of my sexual hangups and instead he'd . . . what? Hard telling. All of us had gone through our teens with an obsession for sex — an obsession not consummated until far later than usual, which had led to all sorts of doubts about our masculinity. From my companions' conversation I'd gathered that most of them had conquered that and gotten married and were enjoying pretty normal monogamous lives, but the billionaire wasn't married. And he was curious.

I could have told him all about it, but instead I just said, "Yeah, it was quite a time." I was grinning from ear to ear. Not every day do I have a genuine billionaire envy me.

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He said, "So, what, you married her and she went to work as a nude dancer and you never had to get a job?"

"Close," I said. "She's a model."

"You lucky bastard."

"You should talk."

He laughed at that, a full, deep-throated laugh that turned heads all through the room. "Touché," he said, giving me a slap on the shoulder, then he got up to circulate among his other guests.

NONE OF US wanted to be the first to leave the party, so it was still going on strong about three in the morning. After my talk with our host, I decided to mingle, spending a little time with the fireman and the astronaut and even the woman, who, it turned out, was from a world line close to mine. She'd been a he — she'd been *me* — until about a year after we'd met Sonja, when Sonja had dumped her (him? me?) for a football player. She claimed that wasn't the only reason she'd changed her gender, and I remembered enough of my own adolescent frustrations to believe her, but I had no doubt that was the catalyst.

She'd changed her name to Michelle. I think she'd have gone to bed with me if I'd asked simply because I still slept with Sonja every night, but maybe not. I didn't try to find out. She wound up with the astronaut, just as everyone had guessed she would all along.

Their departure seemed to be the signal for the rest of us to sack out as well. I knocked back the last of my fifth Henry's and staggered up the stairs and down the third-floor hallway into the east wing, trying to remember which room was mine. They were all named after astronauts, and I was in the Jim Lovell Room, but I had forgotten just which one that was.

My vision was blurry from lateness and drink. I had to get close to each door in order to read its nameplate. The doors alternated left and right rather than opening across from each other, so I suppose I must have looked pretty drunk, weaving from side to side down the hall. Lots more drunk than I really was, anyway, which was why, when I finally found my room, I managed to leap aside long enough to see the face of the guy who jumped me from behind the door.

Fat lot of good it did. He was me, too.

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* * *

I woke on a waterbed the size of a small state, with sunlight pouring in through floor-to-ceiling windows and splashing across my legs. I lay diagonally on top of the covers, still dressed. Someone — no doubt my evil twin — had taken off my shoes and stuck a pair of bunny slippers over my feet. Cute.

I rolled to my feet, expecting a hangover, but my headache was mercifully mild. I checked for bruises, but he'd evidently used chloroform or some other gas instead of a blackjack to knock me out. I appreciated his thoughtfulness. I wondered which one of me it had been, and why.

I had a pretty good idea where I was, anyway. The guest rooms were posh, but even a mansion could have only one bedroom like the one I was in. It was large enough to make the waterbed seem almost normal, filled with enough antique furniture to start a museum, had a separate alcove with its own couch and chairs for reading and watching TV, and from where I stood by the side of the bed I could see into a skylit, plant-lined bathroom that could double as a conservatory.

A door opened behind me. I turned to see a maid — a real one, I guessed, though she was blonde and shapely and dressed in a skimpy black lace uniform — standing in the doorway with a pile of fresh sheets and towels in her arms.

"Oh," she said when she saw me. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realize you were still here."

I ran a hand through my hair, suddenly aware that I must look like hell, and said, "That's all right. I hadn't planned to be. You have any idea where our host might be?"

"Our host, sir?"

"The version of myself who threw the party."

Frowning, she said, "You're joking, aren't you, sir? I mean — you're wearing the bunny slippers."

I looked down to my feet. The velveteen ears dangled to the floor like untied laces.

"Let me guess," I said. "The bunny slippers were supposed to be a sign, just in case one of us tried to impersonate your —" I almost said, "master," but changed it in time to "employer."

"That's right. You thought it up yourself. Didn't you?"

I shook my head. "Not this version of me. I'm one of the guests."

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"Then —"

She let it hang, so I stated the obvious for her. "Then, unless everyone got a pair, I'd guess your boss pulled the old switcheroo with me."

"The old — why would he do that?"

It took all of about three seconds to figure that out. "Sonja," I said. "The bastard's got a crush on my wife." I laughed aloud at the thought, and the maid looked even more puzzled than before.

"Why are you laughing?" she asked. "If you're really not him, then he's been gone all morning. He's probably there by now, and —" She blushed.

"And nothing." I raised a bunny slipper up off the floor and wiggled my big toe. The rabbit's nose wiggled with it. "He wasn't the only person with a signal set up just in case." And when he got home without a yellow daffodil for Sonja, she would . . . hmm. Knowing her, she'd probably let him in and give him his romp in the sack and then some, but at least she'd *know*. And when I got back she'd no doubt tell me all about it, too, jokingly detailing all the ways he was better than me.

I looked at the maid with new appreciation. If her boss was off dallying with my wife, then a little turnabout seemed in order. I wondered if she and he had that kind of relationship.

She recognized the look. "Forget it," she said. "I wear this ridiculous getup for him but I don't sleep with him, and I don't intend to do it with you, either."

It was my turn to blush. "Sorry. It was a natural thought."

"Don't I know it." Her smile swept the sudden tension away. "I'll tell you this, having fifty of you in the house has kept me on my toes." She turned and dropped the linen on top of a cart just outside the door, then turned back toward me and said, "On the other hand, I can appreciate your situation. Fair is fair, and all that. Well if you want to play with *his* toys, I'll show you where he keeps them. Will that do?"

I'd gotten the nickel tour of the mansion last night, but I got the feeling the maid was talking about something a little more extensive. And with that outfit she was wearing, I'd have followed her anywhere.

"Sure," I said. "Let's go play."

The billionaire still had a lot of the same tastes I did; he just had more opportunity to indulge himself. Where I had a sports car in the garage, he had over a dozen. My library filled a couple of walls in my study; his filled

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two rooms the size of his bedroom. Sonja and I had a pool in the back yard; he had a lake.

We wound up our tour in his office. It was on the top floor, with lots of windows looking out over the grounds of his estate, and full of plants, books, and paintings. I recognized most of the paintings, though mine were poster prints.

I paused to admire *Starry Night,* wondering who had the original in my universe and thinking about trying to fit it into my suitcase when it came time to go home. On a hunch, I tugged on the frame. Sure enough, it swung out to reveal a safe.

"Think I should try it?" I asked.

The maid — her name was Jeannette — said, "You're the boss," but her voice was that of a co-conspirator rather than an underling. She'd warmed considerably since we'd met.

"*Maybe* I'm the boss," I said. "Bunny slippers or no, I get the feeling this is the acid test."

Jeanette watched over my shoulder while I spun the dial. My birthday wasn't the combination. Neither was Mom's, nor Dad's, nor any of my siblings'. I thought a moment longer, remembering the astronaut motif in the guest rooms, and tried 7-20-69. The door popped open with a satisfying thump, and I thanked finagle that our universes had split after the moon landings instead of before.

Inside was a thick file folder, a stack of gold bars, and a leather-bound copy of *The Prince and the Pauper.* A note in my own handwriting lying on top of it read:

> Dear Self,
> Let's ~~////~~ live the next volume.
> — You

Jeanette whistled softly and said, "Wow, he isn't kidding, is he?"

"Doesn't look that way," I said. I suddenly realized why he'd thrown this party: he'd been planning to switch with someone all along, but he needed a chance to decide which one. And I got the prize. I wasn't sure I liked the arrogant way he assumed I'd go along with it, but I supposed he was used to just taking what he wanted. I made a mental note not to fall into the same trap.

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"How 'bout it? Are you going to stay?"

I picked up one of the gold bars and hefted it in my hand. It was stamped *1,000 grams*, but it felt heavier. I thought about my life at home, how I'd sometimes wished I could do something different with it. Here was the perfect opportunity.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe. We'll just have to see."

"Well, just between you and me, it wouldn't hurt my feelings any," she said.

"Oh?"

"Your alter ego can be a real jerk sometimes."

I felt a brief moment of anger at her words. Hey, it was *me* she was criticizing, after all. Then I realized how silly I was being. Our lives had diverged a decade and a half ago, long enough for us to have become two completely separate people. I was my own person, and he was his. And evidently he'd been a tyrant in his house.

Well, now I had my hand on the tiller, at least for a while. I held the gold bar out to her and said, "You hate that silly maid outfit, don't you? Here. Go buy yourself some clothes."

Over the next few days, Jeanette and I partied like kids whose parents were away. We explored parts of the mansion even she had never seen before, took cars from the garage and drove them around town, and when night fell we watched the stars from the rooftop observatory.

I was pointing out the summer triangle, using the age-old technique of standing behind her and letting her sight along my outstretched arm, when she asked playfully, "Are you going to tell your wife who it is you've been spending your time with here?"

"Of course," I said. "We're completely candid with each other."

"Completely?"

"Sure. I could tell her I slept with you and it wouldn't bother her."

She turned around beneath my outstretched arm. Her nose was maybe an inch from mine when she asked, "*Are* you going to tell her that?"

Up to now I'd been bantering with her, playing, but I recognized the tone in her voice and answered just as seriously, "I don't know. Am I?"

"That's up to you."

We wound up looking at the stars from a different perspective the rest of the night. I felt a brief twinge of guilt about it, brief because I'd been

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telling the truth about my open marriage, but guilt because I'd never taken advantage of our agreement before. I hadn't had to; Sonja was more adventurous than me, and she usually brought people home for threesomes often enough to provide all the spice I needed.

I wondered if she was having as much fun with the billionaire version of myself as I was having with his maid. I wished I could just call and ask her, but a cross-dimensional phone call was almost as expensive as an actual transfer.

Then I cursed myself for an idiot. What was I worried about? *I* was the billionaire now.

THE CALL took a while to set up, mostly going through security clearances designed to prevent kids from bankrupting their parents by calling alternate girlfriends. When I'd convinced the phone company that I really did intend to pay for the call, they made the connection and I heard the familiar ring of my home phone on the line.

Click. "Hello?"

"Sonja!"

A pause. "Michael?"

"None other."

"Oh. Hi." I heard rustling noises, then, "You calling from over there?"

"Yeah." I tried to keep my voice casual, as if I made cross-dimensional calls all the time.

She sounded pretty calm, too. "So, how do you like it there?"

"I'm having a blast," I admitted. "But I figured I'd better make sure *you* were, too."

She laughed. It was more like a shriek. "Yeah, you could say that."

Images of my alter self tickling her while she talked on the phone —something I'd used to do — came unbidden to me. I tried not to feel jealous. I had Jeanette, after all.

This didn't seem to be quite the time to tell Sonja that, though. "It's okay with you, then?" I asked.

There was an even longer pause, then, "Maybe better than okay."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean he's being really good to me."

"Aren't I good to you?"

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An edge had crept into her voice. "Sure you are. But . . . he doesn't nag me about everything."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "I don't nag you either . . . do I?"

"Michael, when was the last time you told me to pick up my shoes?"

"Reminding you to pick up your shoes is nagging?"

"Yes. And so is telling me to put on a coat when I go out, and always telling me not to lock my keys in the car, and —"

"I tell you not to lock your keys in the car because you keep doing it if I don't."

"So what? They're my keys, damn it, and my car."

"And I'm the one who has to — wait a minute. I didn't call you to argue about your keys. I called to see if you were okay. It sounds like you are. In fact, it sounds like it might be a good thing if I just stayed here for a while."

"Yeah, maybe you should."

"All right, then." I waited for inspiration; none came. "Well, then, I guess I'll be seeing you later."

"Yeah. 'Bye."

"'Bye." Almost as an afterthought, I said, "I love you, Sonja."

I listened for a response, but all I got were the bleeps and clicks of circuits disengaging, then dial tone.

I found Jeanette sitting crosswise in an armchair, reading *The Prince and the Pauper*. "Maybe she's having her period," she said when I told her about the call.

"Then why isn't she mad at him, too?" I asked.

"Hmm. Good point."

"She called me a nag. She's never done that before."

"She's never had a different version of you to compare against, either." Jeanette grinned. "Look, don't sweat it. If she hates nagging, she'll get tired of *him* plenty quick. She'll be begging you to come back before you know it."

"Yeah, maybe so." I wasn't convinced. I sat down on an arm of the chair and looked out over the treetops. "What if I *am* a nag?" I asked.

Jeanette shrugged. "Then you're a nag. Better than being a selfish autocrat."

"Not the way Sonja made it sound."

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Jeanette closed the book and leaned forward to wrap an arm around me. "Then she doesn't know what she's throwing away. Her loss."

I pulled away and began pacing the room. "Jeanette, she's my *wife*. I can't just . . . abandon her because somebody else has made a pass at her."

"Nobody's asking you to. She's just enjoying the attention. Even Michael — the other Michael — can be charming when he wants to be. Give him time to show his other side, though, and she'll get tired of him quick enough."

"About the same time you start calling me a nag?"

She shrugged again. "Maybe. Who knows? Familiarity breeds contempt, and all that."

Yeah, I thought. Evidently more than I'd realized.

I tried to put Sonja out of my mind after that, tried to enjoy my stay in paradise and enjoy Jeanette's company there, but Sonja's rejection kept getting in the way.

Jeanette tried too, even going so far as to put on her maid suit again and dust the high shelves one afternoon while I was reading, but after about fifteen minutes of silence she descended again and stood before me with her hands on her hips.

"All I can say is, she must be one hell of a woman."

I made room for her on the couch, and after a moment of hesitation, she sat down beside me. "She's no more woman than you are," I said, "except that she's my wife, and that makes her more than anyone else in the world to me. We've lived together for fifteen years. I don't want to throw all that away. Not even for you."

Jeanette swung as if to hit me with the feather duster, but she didn't follow through. "God, I wish I'd met you first," she said, dropping the duster in her lap. "You realize most women would kill for that kind of dedication from their men?"

"Except one."

"Hah. How's she supposed to know you feel that way about her? Have you ever told her?"

"N — no. Not in so many words."

"Well there you go."

"You think I should call her up and tell her?"

Jeanette thought a moment. "Look, if you're really all that serious about it, why don't you just go back? Show up at the door with flowers for

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her. That would mean more than just a phone call."

"I suppose so." I nodded. "It's always easier to say 'no' over the phone. okay, then tomorrow I'll go back."

Jeanette didn't say anything.

"Jeanette? I'm sorry I can't—"

"Don't apologize. Not for that." She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek and then stood up. "It's been fun. One of my little fantasies came true for a while, and now I've got to wake up to the real world. That's still better than most people get."

I watched her walk out of the library, clothed more in dignity and grace than anything else, and if I hadn't been telling her the truth a moment earlier then I'd have been up and following her in an instant. But I'd meant every word of it. I was going home to my wife.

I heard her laughter when I walked up the steps to the house — *our* house! — laughter that stopped when I slid my key into the lock and opened the door.

They were sitting together on the couch in the living room, she with her head resting on his chest, he with his arms around her, hand casually cupping her breast.

"Michael," she said, straightening up. "What are you doing here?"

I said, "I've come back to live in my own home, with my own wife."

My other self stood, and Sonja stood beside him. His face was beginning to turn red, evidently from embarrassment at being caught with another man's wife. "What happened?" he asked. "I thought you were enjoying yourself at my place."

"I was. Then it dawned on me that I wasn't sharing it with the person who means the most to me, and then it wasn't any fun anymore. So I came back." I opened my coat and took the yellow daffodil out of its protective wrapping and held it out to Sonja.

She looked at the flower, then at me. "It's not that simple," she said.

"What?"

"It's not that simple. I like him better."

I had to concentrate on breathing for a second to get my voice under control enough to say, "But I belong here."

She shook her head. "Not anymore."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing, couldn't believe the coldness in

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her eyes, but then I remembered how she'd dumped another version of me for a football player and I began to realize it just might be possible she meant it. She'd always formed relationships easily, and with the single exception of myself, she'd always broken them easily as well. I'd always thought that was because she loved me, but maybe it had just been the course of least resistance. Maybe it had only been the hassle of divorce that had kept her from dumping me when I became less than her dream lover, and now that she could do it without that complication, there was nothing to stop her.

The billionaire said, "We've discussed this quite a bit, and neither of us sees any reason why you and I can't continue the switch indefinitely. You're certainly competent enough to handle what few loose ends I've left over there, and face it, I'm doing a better job here."

"Are you?" I looked at Sonja. She may not have loved me anymore, but I still loved her, and I wasn't going to give her up without a fight. I asked her, "Does he stand up for you when the damn photographers want you to do moonlight shots in the cold surf? Does he take home-cooked dinner to you when you're on an extended shoot? Does he —" I stopped. Wrong line? Hell with it, go for broke. "Does he rescue you when you lock yourself out of your car in the studio parking lot?"

She at least had the decency to blush. But then she said, "I haven't been to work. I took the week off. I wanted to spend some time with my new husband."

"*I'm* your husband!"

"Not anymore."

"You had your chance," he said. "You didn't know what you had, and you blew it. Just be glad you've got something as nice as what I left you to fall back on."

I had no trouble finding my voice now. "Oh yeah?" I said. "Well you aren't so hot yourself, you know. I had Jeanette in the sack by the third day. She says she'd have slept with you years ago if you weren't so damned overbearing." To Sonja, I said, "Keep that in mind, sweetie. His staff is terrified of him. He's a regular little Hitler in his own castle."

I could tell by his expression that my first arrow had hit its target, but Sonja just batted her eyelashes in feigned surprise and smiled up at him. "Are you really? My, who'd have thought it."

That was the final straw. "Go ahead and laugh," I said. "But don't come

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to me —" I stopped, unable to finish.

"Yes? You were saying?"

I laid the daffodil on the coffee table. "I was about to say something I didn't mean. Truth is, when you get tired of this jerk, give me a call. I'll still be waiting for you." Without waiting for an answer, I turned and walked back out the door, closing it softly behind me.

IT HAD been raining on his world while I was gone; there was a rainbow over the house when I got back. The symbolism was so obvious I had to laugh, and I was still laughing when I walked in the front door and surprised Jeanette hard at work polishing the banister on the front staircase.

"Welcome back, sir," she said, with a smile as cold and artificial as the one I'd just left. She was wearing the skimpy getup again.

"Sir?" I said. "Jeanette, it's *me*. Sonja told me to go take a hike."

That got a genuine smile, but still a few watts short of the glow I was used to. "Begging your pardon, sir, but I thought she would. Your other self is really in love with her."

"That shady son of a —? Wait a minute. You've got it backwards. She didn't go for the daffodil, or any of the rest of it. Your former boss still has her mesmerized. I'm the guy you never expected to see again."

She took a couple of hesitant steps down the stairs. "Are you — I mean — how can I know for sure?"

Hmm. That was a puzzler. The two of us were identical right down to the genetic level. I could describe my stay here, but I could also have described it to my other self and he could say the same things. It had to be something else, something I couldn't have shared with him.

I grinned. "Well, I'm pretty sure my other self never went bicycling with Sonja in France, at least not yet, so he probably didn't hit the car door some idiot flung open, so I doubt if he has the scar on his left side where the broken window sliced him. I think you remember that scar, don't you?" Care to check and see if it's still there?"

She took a deep breath and stepped down the last two stairs to stand before me. "If it's not, then I'm quitting," she said. "And then I'm going to go kick the shit out of him for telling you about us."

Laughing, I unbuttoned my shirt for her so she wouldn't have to wonder if she was unbuttoning *his*, and I showed her the scar.

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I wasn't sure how she would react: a scream and a leap, a passionate kiss, or what.

I got all three. A little while later, when we got around to talking, she said, "It really is you. Welcome home."

I tried to make it my home. I tried to forget Sonja and just concentrate on enjoying my new life, but each day that passed without a call from her just fueled my obsession. What were they doing over there? Discussing my inadequacies and laughing? I remembered feeling that way as a teenage virgin: sure that everyone was talking behind my back, and all my old self-doubt came back to haunt me. I knew now why the female version of myself had had a sex change. Jeanette kept me from feeling quite the depression Michelle must have felt, but all the same, it's hard to recover immediately from being dumped by your one true love. I moped and I cursed and I threw vases at the walls, but it was only when I found myself thinking about drawing a supernova into *Starry Night* that I realized I was overreacting.

I had to either forget her or win her back, and since forgetting her seemed to be impossible, then I would just have to concentrate my resources on winning her back. At least I had resources.

But what could I do with them? Money wouldn't impress her; she made enough on her own, and I was sure my rival had taken plenty with him, too. According to Jeanette, I was a nicer person than him, but that apparently wasn't as obvious to Sonja as it was to her. And in all other respects we were practically identical. The only thing I had to offer Sonja that he didn't was a past. Fifteen years of life together. Those years were important to her, I was sure of that, but apparently in the flush of excitement at having the new, improved model around, she wasn't thinking about them.

So I had to get her to thinking about them. Get her lonesome for the person she had shared so much of her life with. How could I do that?

I was coming up blank. I considered asking Jeanette for suggestions, but I ditched that idea. She was the most understanding person I could imagine in such a situation, but she didn't deserve that kind of treatment. But I had to talk with someone about it.

Who? I didn't know anybody else over here. The only people besides Jeanette whom I'd spent any time with were forty-nine other versions of

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myself, and I didn't see what good they would be. Most of them didn't even know Sonja, and the one who did had done something even more drastic than painting a supernova on *Starry Night.*

Most of them didn't even know her. That thought bobbed to the surface again. Yeah. I smiled my first real smile in days. I could already see possibilities.

The garbage truck smelled of coffee grounds and moldy fruit. I'd forgotten that smell, but the moment it hit me, so did the memory of that long-ago summer before college, when I'd collected garbage to help pay my tuition. Who'd have guessed that would be one of the turning points in my life?

I fervently hoped this would be another.

The version of myself who was more familiar with the aroma stood on the rear bumper and clung to the Jesus bar while I bounced us down the alley behind our house. I checked my watch again. We were ten minutes early, which was just where I wanted us. The regular truck was still a few blocks away, and Sonja would still be out in the tennis court. She was always complaining that the damn garbage truck spoiled her game, but she was just stubborn enough that she always played right up to the last minute anyway. I smiled as our house came into view. No one else in the universe — *any* universe — knew that about her.

There she was, hands on hips, looking exasperated. I looked back to the alley, swerving just in time to miss the garbage cans, and skidded the truck to a stop. My alter self swung down off the bumper and pulled the first can over to the lift.

I reached out and adjusted the mirror so I could see her without leaning out and giving her a good look at me. Her expression was everything I wanted it to be: surprise, shock, suspicion, and finally concern when she realized her husband the garbage man wasn't paying any attention to her.

There was no way I could fake a blank look when I saw her, but there was no way he could give her anything else. I hadn't shown him any pictures of her, hadn't even told him which house was ours, to ensure that not even a flicker of recognition passed between them when he saw her.

Oh, he looked at her, all right, but he was paying just as much attention to her tennis partner, one of the other models from the agency.

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I could see her opening her mouth to say something to him, so I revved the engine a couple of times and engaged the power take-off. My double yanked the lever and the lift took the can up and dumped it into the hopper, then banged it back on the ground. He unclamped it and shoved it back next to its mate, leaving that one for the regular crew, climbed up on the bumper again, and whistled for me to drive on.

When the neighbor's fence blocked my view, she was still standing there like a puppet hung from a peg.

The surveyor's job was even easier. For one thing, transits are easier to rent than garbage trucks, and for another, all he had to do was set up the tripod in the street and wait until she drove past on her way out. The garbage man and I waited in the van. We didn't even have to wait long; I knew within minutes when she would be going out. She had a regular appointment at one of the suntan salons downtown.

At first I thought she hadn't recognized him. He looked up from the transit when he heard her car coming, saw she wasn't going to hit him, and bent down to the eyepiece again while she continued down the street as if nothing had happened. But then we heard a squeal of tires at the end of the street and the blare of a horn and I realized she'd almost run the stop sign. She'd been too busy looking in the rear-view mirror.

The deejay even got paid for his trouble. He'd spent a few minutes in the suntan salon while the rest of us were arranging for truck and transit — just long enough to find out which station they played for background music — then he'd gone over to the studio and offered to do an "alternate hits" show featuring subtly different versions of current hit songs from his own universe. They'd jumped at the chance, and Sonja, we hoped, had jumped up and down in frustration at hearing his voice on the radio without so much as a "hello" for her.

We weren't trying to be cruel, but we wanted to let her know just what it felt like to be ignored by someone she loved. As far as I knew, Sonja had never been dumped by a boyfriend, but she was a smart woman; she would make the connection. And then, I hoped, she would think it over and realize that out of all the copies of me in the various universes, only one of us had shared his life with her.

It almost worked. It *would* have worked if the billionaire hadn't been

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fighting to keep her, too. But her phone call was only an apology, not an invitation. She realized now how she'd hurt me, she said, but that still didn't change the way she felt. The billionaire was offering her fun and frolic and new adventure, while all I had to offer was comfort and familiarity.

This time I did call up Michelle, the female version of myself. She and I and Jeanette got stinking drunk, and all three of us wound up sharing the master bedroom's enormous waterbed in a three-way orgy that surpassed even the night I met Sonja. I remember laughing aloud at myself for ever wanting to go back to the silly bitch anyway. Then I threw up on the antique clock beside the bed and passed out.

I woke up in the shower, with Michelle washing me off. There's an intermediate stage between drunk and hungover where a person actually feels fairly good; I was evidently passing through it on my way down.

"Sorry," I said over the hiss of falling water. "That was really disgusting."

"Yeah, it was," she admitted. With a wry grin and a shake of her head, she said, "Some people would find this whole situation disgusting, you know?"

"I suppose so."

"But every now and then, I think a threesome can be kind of fun."

I nodded. "Sonja's more into it than I am, but I've never complained when she brought someone home."

"Yeah. I don't do it very often myself. But every time I do, it's a real experience."

I took the soap from Michelle and started washing her back. "What about Jeanette? How's she taking it?"

"She's a little weirded out, I think, but she'll be okay. She's probably seen lots worse in a place like this."

"Wrong," Jeanette said from the doorway. She stepped into the shower with us, and we all held onto one another to keep from slipping. "I've never done anything like this, and neither did he. It was always one lover at a time for him, and usually the same one for months. That's why I never really minded playing the French Maid. I didn't figure he was all that serious anyway, except when he was between girlfriends."

"I'll be damned," I said. "The rich playboy is actually a closet monogamist. Who'd have believed it?"

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"And the monogamist is actually a playboy at heart," Jeanette said with a grin. "None of you are quite what you seem."

"That's what makes us so irresistible," I said, but I was thinking: Had Sonja never walked in on Karen and me, I would never have become this open with other women. And had I not even married Karen, as most of the other versions of me had, then I would have become still less comfortable around them. That's what had happened to the billionaire.

"You two are irresistible, maybe," Jeanette said. "But not all of you."

I frowned. "You keep telling me what a horrible person your old boss used to be, but Sonja's still hanging out with him. Why do you suppose that is?"

She thought about that for a minute, then said, "Because he hasn't had the opportunity to show her his other side yet. Trust me; he's an intolerant, possessive bastard."

My female self looked at me with a calculating expression.

"What?"

"Maybe that's where you went wrong. You were trying to show her how great a person *you* are, when what you need to do instead is show her how narrow-minded *he* is."

"Oh sure. How do you suppose I'm going to do that, with a pair of calipers?"

She smiled and rubbed her hands sensuously over her glistening wet body. "You just leave that to me."

It was a splendid explosion. Jeanette and I were watching from the bushes when Sonja came home from the tanning salon with Michelle in tow. The two of them entered the house, blushing and giggling like teenagers, and about five minutes later Michael the billionaire came puffing out the same door, his face the color of iron fresh out of the forge. He jumped in the car and backed spinning out of the driveway, ground the transmission into first, and careened up to the cross street, disappearing from sight with a final squeal of tires. I figured I'd find the car abandoned at the dimensional transfer station, probably with a couple of smashed fenders. It was a fair trade.

Provided Sonja would take me back now that he was gone.

There was only one way to find out. "Well," I said, standing up and helping Jeanette out of the bushes. "Shall we go inside?"

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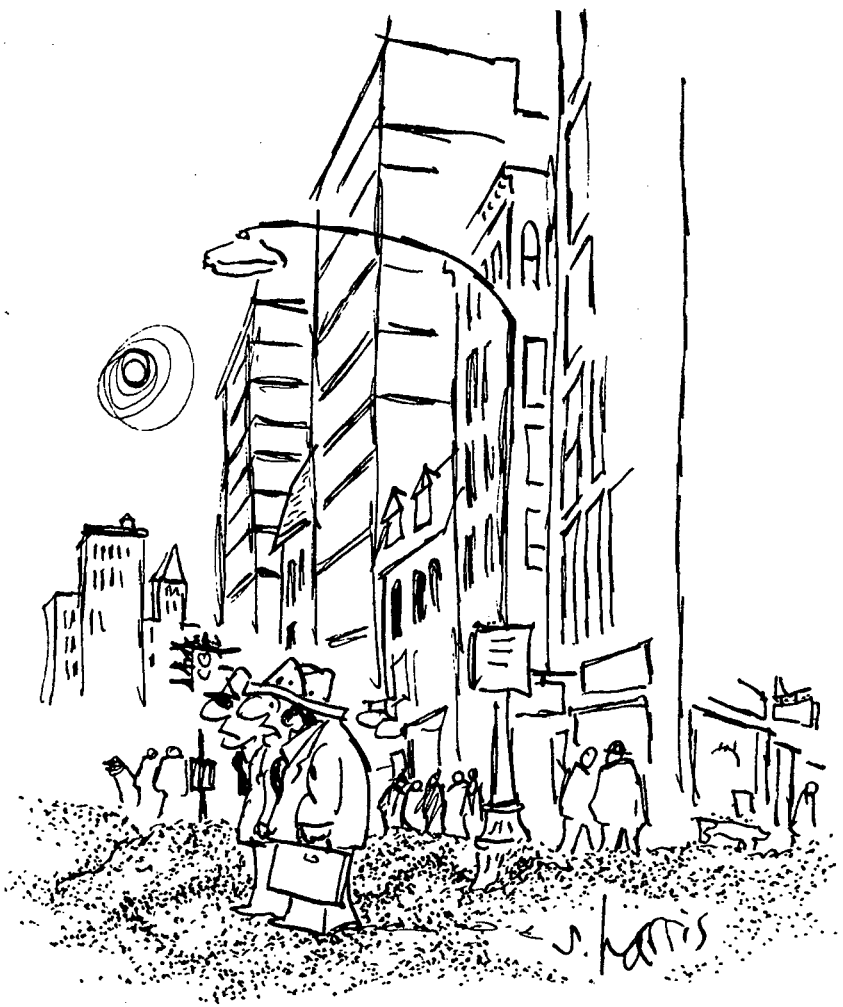
She grinned. "Think you can handle three of us at once?"
I grinned right back at her. "If I can't, I can always call in reinforcement."



"Who would have thought, when they said the deserts were expanding . . ."

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Lois Tilton last appeared in these pages with "The Twelve Swans," the cover story for our June issue. Her story in our 1991 October/November issue was picked up for The Year's Best Science Fiction, *edited by Gardner Dozois. Her first novel,* Vampire Winter, *appeared in 1990. Pinnacle will publish her second,* Darkness on the Ice, *sometime in the future. "Sleep, My Little One," is not fantasy, but short, effective science fiction. Lois writes, "'Sleep' is in a way about my 9 year-old daughter Christine, who just got her first AA times in competition this spring. This is how we live."*

"Sleep, My Little One"

By Lois Tilton

DO I *gotta* go to bed? None of the other kids —

"Of course you do. Seven-year-olds have to go to sleep at night. Now lie down."

Sara firmly pushed the stiff little shoulders down to the pillow. She gave her son's cheek a kiss.

Like a spring, he was sitting upright again. "But *Mom*! I didn't finish my book yet!"

"Then you'll just have to do it tomorrow. It's nine o'clock. Bedtime."

"But —"

"Michael!" It was her not-one-more-word voice, and Mikey subsided, glowering.

Sara lowered the hood of the nook, cutting off the light and noise from the rest of the house. It was the same thing every night.

She sighed, remembering her own mother sitting on the edge of her bed

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with a book. Robert Lewis Stevenson. Longfellow. How Mom had loved those old poems!

Between the dark and the daytime, when night is beginning to lower. . . .

She always had meant to read to her own kids at bedtime. Had done it, when Mikey was Holly's age. But there never seemed to be time, anymore.

Crossing the room, Sara noticed Mikey's reader on the chair, and she popped out the slide and glanced at the title. *The Miraculous Ornithopter.* It looked like an awfully long book for second grade. Sara felt guilt twinges. She was the one who had decided to stop off at the Automart after the soccer game, knowing he had homework.

But he had to sleep, too! He was only seven years old.

She turned to Holly's nook and cautiously lifted the hood, decorated with gamboling pastel unicorns. The two-year-old was asleep, blanket kicked off. Her lips moved, and Sara wondered if she were dreaming. Bending low, she whispered a line from Tennyson, "Sleep, my little one, sleep, my pretty one, sleep." Mom had sung that to her, like a lullaby. So long ago.

Sara shut the nursery door and glanced at her watch. Almost 9:30. The long bath she'd promised herself before dinner wouldn't be quite so long.

She sank down in nearly scalding water, stretched out and felt the weariness of the long day leach from her muscles and bones. Kids. God, they could wear you down! Sara worked from home most days, linked on-line to the firm's trading desk. She logged an average of five hours from the terminal in her office — not bad, with a toddler running around the house. And then there was Mikey and all his activities — swim team, soccer, keyboard lessons.

She sank even deeper into the tub, sighed, and closed her eyes, shaping in her mind the pattern of syllables that would cue her to relax, alpha waves slowing in a deep, regular rhythm. She could still remember some of the dreams of her childhood. Morpheus, God of Dreams. She imagined him as a beautiful boy with soft, feathered wings. Morpheus, son of Sleep and Night — was that right? The light touch of feathers. . . .

But the water in the tub was getting uncomfortably cool and it was time to get ready for work. Refreshed now, Sara did her hair quickly and was almost dressed when the doorcom announced that the sitter had come.

Sara called, "Come in," from her dressing room and the voicelock

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popped open. Kristin entered carrying her reader and a stack of research slides.

"Doing a report?" Sara asked.

Kristin groaned dramatically. "Ten thousand words. 'The Growth of Global Electronic Trading.'"

"You might think of going back to the stock ticker," Sara advised her. But they sure had a lot more work these days than when she was in high school. Sara couldn't remember doing a ten-thousand-word paper until she started college.

"Well, at least the kids won't be awake to bother you. Help yourself in the kitchen whenever you get hungry."

Days at home, nights at the office. The Mommy shift, they all called it. And of course the markets never slept. Sometimes, Sara had to admit it, working from the terminal at home wasn't the same, nothing like the electronic excitement of Being There, so close to the action of the Exchange. But altogether she thought she was content. She wasn't going to make Senior Partner, of course. But she had no real ambition to work back-to-back shifts week in and out. It cost too much. She glanced across the hallway at Hagopian, virtually hard-wired into his terminal, quotes running across the glazed surfaces of his eyeballs. Did he have a family? Did he ever see them? Sara would make Senior Associate within the next ten years, maybe Partner if things went well, but she was at home to put the kids to bed, too.

The trading desk was busy. Around two o'clock, Sara grabbed a quick nunch at the health-food bar on the first floor. At six, just when she was clearing her files for the next shift, Pearson showed up. "Think you could work a few hours late this morning?"

Sara frowned. In an hour, the kids would be waking up. Mikey would have to get ready for school. And Kristin's classes started at nine. "Let me check."

She called her husband's number, and Warren answered from his car. "Hi, what's up?"

"Pearson wants me to work late. Are you going to be home by seven?"

"I'm on the way now. No problem. Do you want me to pick up anything on the way?"

"No, but you could take Kristin home."

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"Sure. What time do you think you'll be home?"

"He said a few hours. By ten, I suppose."

"All right. I'll get Mike off to school."

"Good, thanks."

Pearson, when she told him, said, "Great! I knew we could count on you!" in a too-hearty voice. One point for my side, Sara scored it, heading for the coffee machine before going back to her desk.

WARREN WAS waiting for her when she got home, wearing his tennis clothes.

"Mikey get off to school all right?" she asked.

"Sure. He was worried about this book he's supposed to read. Don't you think they give them too much work these days?"

"I know," Sara started to say, but Holly dashed into the room and barreled into her. "Mommy!"

"Did Daddy give you breakfast?" Glancing into the kitchen, where the dirty dishes were still all over the counter. "I see he did."

She lifted Holly and nuzzled her hair. Warren was good with the kids, even if kitchens weren't his strong point.

"I'm going over to the club to get in a few sets with Frank," he told her, leaning over Holly's head to kiss Sara good-bye.

She put the baby down and went to change out of her office clothes before she started in on the kitchen. It would be a good day to get some housework in. With the extra hours this morning, she wouldn't really have to log in from home at all today.

Of course she did, later in the afternoon once Warren had left for work again and Holly was quiet in front of the video. Smugly, she hoped Pearson would be checking her timefiles.

But then it was time to go pick up Mikey from school.

He threw his schoolbag into the car and slammed the door. "Mikey?" Sara asked, worried. "Did something happen in school?"

"I didn't finish my *book*." Accusation.

"Well, you can read it tonight — after dinner, after practice. Can't you?"

Sullenly, "I guess."

She was going to have to call his teacher, talk to him, find out about this book business. When did they think the kids were going to have time for all this reading, with everything else they had to do these days?

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"I've got your snack in the bag," she told him. "And don't worry, we'll go right straight home after practice. You'll have plenty of time to finish that book."

Dubious, he opened the bag and took out the banana, cookie and juice she'd packed with his swimming stuff. Glancing back as she drove, Sara noticed that he had his reader on his lap, slurping noisily at his juice while he watched the screen. Oh, let it go, she thought sharply. If he spills, it isn't going to ruin the damn reader.

The pool was across town, far enough away that it was no use to bother going home just to turn around and go back again. Sara let Mikey off and watched him run up the walk to the athletic center, duffel banging against his legs. Then she drove on to the Automart to pick up groceries.

And then back again to the pool, into the familiar heated, chlorine-scented atmosphere of the observation balcony above the pool deck, a blessing for mothers with wandering toddlers. There were usually a dozen little kids that made up an informal playgroup while their siblings practiced. Sara pulled Holly onto her lap, trying at the same time to pick out Mikey down in the pool, but after a few minutes Holly wiggled down to join the others.

Freed, Sara stood up for a better look. The little boys in the water always looked so much alike. Finally she identified her own, down in the fifth lane. They were doing the butterfly, outflung arms arching the upper body up out of the water like a school of dolphins, all in a row. Mikey hit the wall with both hands, gasping, glanced up at the time clock and pushed off again with barely a pause. A few second later, Rick Lorenz reached the end of the lane, hung on the gutter for several seconds before he started his next lap. Then the next kid, and the next, until Mikey came in again, last in the lane, with Pete right on his heels.

"Pick it up, Mike!" the coach yelled. "Watch your interval! Pete, on the thirty — go!"

Sara frowned. Two seats down Marcia Lorenz sat with a reader resting against her right knee, words scrolling down the screen. She always had a book, and yet she never seemed to miss a stroke of what was happening down in the pool.

Mikey and Rick had been swimming together on the team since they were five years old. A year ago they'd gone one-two in the six-and-under age group at the state meet. Now . . . Sara wasn't sure if it was Mikey falling

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behind or Rick pulling so far ahead.

Sara moved down to the seat next to Marcia. "Did Rick make the A-cut in the 50 fly in the meet last weekend?"

"He went 31:14," Marcia replied, putting her reader on "pause." "Just a tenth short of AA."

Sara bit her lip. Double-A. And Mikey was almost three seconds short of the A time. "I don't know," she admitted, glancing down to where her son struggled to keep from falling behind the rest of the pack. "It just seems like lately Mikey can't keep up. With school, with swimming — anything."

Marcia raised a carefully shaped eyebrow. "You don't bring him to practice every day, I don't think?"

"Not until soccer's over. His team has a game every Tuesday. I'd hate for him to have to give it up. He really does love soccer. But — Rick plays, too, doesn't he? How can he swim here every day in the soccer season?"

"Oh, when he has a game I bring him to the seven o'clock practice afterward."

"But...." The seven o'clock practice was for the older kids. It lasted until ten at night. "Doesn't he have homework? Doesn't he...."

Doesn't he sleep?

Sara felt her face flush with embarrassment. No, of course he didn't. Rick had plenty of time for swimming practice and soccer. Plenty of time for his homework. He could read *The Miraculous Ornithoper* and watch the video when he was done. He didn't have to go to bed at nine o'clock — he didn't have to go to bed at all.

None of the other kids . . . .

"At age seven?" she asked, still not quite willing to believe that kids so young could give up sleep.

But she could remember. She'd been sixteen years old when the techniques for switching off the sleep center had first been released to the general public. How she'd begged and pleaded with Mom — there was so much work and not enough time to finish it all, everyone else was having it done. She'd finally gotten switched that first year in college, and, oh, then there'd been time for everything — for a while.

Marcia nodded. "Oh, yes. My cousins just had their daughter switched this summer, before she started first grade. Really, with all the work they give the kids these days, what other choice is there?"

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"I assumed . . . I mean, when he started high school — junior high, maybe. . . ."

Marcia shook her head, smiling, tolerant of the less enlightened. "Think of all the advantages he'd be missing. And if the other kids are going to start getting it done — you don't want him to fall behind, do you?"

"No, but —"

"There's nothing to worry about. When we had Rick switched, he was on Alpha-Nine for a few weeks until he learned to relax. We have him lie down for a half hour every day, after dinner, and make sure he isn't watching video all night. Next year, we're going to enroll him in some classes."

"Mommy! Wanna go home!" Sara looked down to where Holly was clinging to her leg, yanking it. "Mom-MEE!"

"Of course, when they're younger," Marcia remarked with a slight smile, "you want them to sleep. But look, why don't you call our doctor — Lewis Nolan. Quite a few of my friends are taking their kids to him now."

Numbly, Sara reached into her bag and gave Holly a cookie. "Here. We have to wait for Mikey to finish practice? See?"

But as she looked back down to the pool, she saw her son standing out on the pool deck with his head lowered, nodding listlessly as he listened to the coach. Finally he jumped back into the water, but in the sixth lane, the slower lane.

Marcia, ever tactful, switched her reader back on.

While Sara, grieving, pulled Holly onto her lap and buried her face in the fine baby hair, like the softest touch of feathers, so delicate, so easily blown away.

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Individually, this has been a busy year for both Steve Perry and George Guthridge. George's novel, Child of the Light *(in collaboration with Janet Gluckman) appeared from St. Martin's Press. He has been nationally honored for excellence in teaching for his work with Alaskan Eskimos. He has sold over four dozen short stories, and has been a Hugo and Nebula finalist. Steve Perry last appeared in the September 1992 issue. Bantam just published his most recent novel, based on the movie* Aliens. *The final book in the Matadoor series,* Brother Death, *just appeared from Ace. When asked for updated bio information, they wrote back separately and said remarkably similar things about the collaborative experience. "Even though we rarely agreed about anything in the writing process," George wrote, "we have sold everything on which we've collaborated." Steve wrote: "Each of us hated the way the other one wrote. We always took out each other's favorite lines and bits. Still, we sold 'em all. Strange world." The process may not have been fun, but "The Macaw" is wonderful. Enjoy it. I'm not sure if we'll be able to get Perry and Guthridge to collaborate again . . .*

The Macaw

By Steve Perry and George Guthridge

Aleem's entrance into the Indian ambassador's party was as smooth as oil on warm glass, at the precise instant between too early and too late. That was part of the showing, in itself as important as any other part. She glided in quietly, the twin tigers padding along beside her. Then she stood posed, not speaking as the door slid shut, blocking out the L.A. night and the ever-present crowd that must have watched in awe as she'd alighted from her private car.

Next to me the ambassador had lifted a drink bulb to his lips. He choked and covered his mouth with his dark hand when he saw her. Saw *them*. He hadn't approved the tigers' use, I realized. Someone in his government had surprised him, someone who knew how much more valuable the rare cats would be after Aleem used them in the showing. In her *art*.

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Aleem was dressed in a gray bodysuit and ballet slippers, her thin figure almost childlike. Her short, ash-colored hair covered her head like a cap, and she kept her face carefully neutral. In the dimly lit room, she was nearly invisible between the tigers, as she had intended.

But the tigers — ah! — the tigers!

They were Royal Bengals, psychotopicked to follow commands from the ultrasonic stimulator Aleem carried hidden in one hand. As the crowd stood breathless, the moment stretched to a fine and calculated tension — the anticipation building. . . .

The animals paced away from the slight woman, moving in unison toward the large oval rug near the bar. The crowd parted in a rippling wave, uncertain how to react. It was safe, wasn't it?

The big cats surveyed the room, yawned, and stretched out as if lordly aware they were the center of attention and admiration. Each was dyed with luminous green pulse-paint; over that, Aleem had traced a line drawing of the natural fur markings in translucent orange and black. She'd timed the pulse-paint so the cats blinked sequentially, great beasts of living neon; the watchers had to shift their gazes from animal to animal, the effect nearly hypnotic.

There was more: Aleem had injected the cats with myelinglow and, wearing Kirlian shatter-glasses, had traced their nervous systems with yet a differently timed pulse-paint. The tigers were living, blinking paintings, airbrushed to perfection, spectacular to behold. Once the media were allowed into the party, the yawning beasts would show up on a billion holoproj sets around the world, testimonials to the world's most popular living painter: Aleem Van de Mar, screamingly successful artist.

And commercial whore.

And my wife.

The pulse-paint was organic, engineered of living microorganisms, and the bright colonies had brief lives. The colors would fade within hours. By then, holographers would have done their magic to capture and counterfeit the tigers. Three-dimensional projections would adorn private cubicles, and museums would have signed, limited-edition copies. But the living art would dim and be brushed away as flecks of dead gray paint, like dried moss in sunshine, leaving the tigers as before, though more famous.

Her work's transience was one reason for its popularity. Some critics claimed it expressed life's ephemerality. The more cynical said the value

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lay in the lack of an original — Aleem's signature on signed copies was the real collector's item, and people paid dearly for it.

I looked away from the cats and caught Aleem glancing at me. Her neutral expression flickered for an instant, and I thought I saw longing, fear, perhaps anger, in her face. Then the mask slid back into place. I sighed and nodded, wondering what she might have seen behind my own bland facade.

"Ah, Aleem!" Grinning, the ambassador stepped toward her, arms outstretched, to congratulate her. As well he might: his party was *made*; the showing would be talked about for months, and he would gain political clout in small but definite ways.

The many-headed creature that was the party rumbled and broke into approving voice, a cacophony of praise acknowledging Aleem's latest triumph. I turned and worked my way through the throng, heading toward the sleep rooms. I could feel Aleem's stare against the back of my neck, pressed there like a hot hand.

Most of the sleep rooms were empty. I picked one and entered, pausing only to jab the "Occupied" LCD button. I sprawled on the gel cushion and closed my eyes in the soundproofed room's nearly tangible quiet. The soft red light faded out as I adjusted the sleeptrode mesh over my temples.

Sleep: needed for normal recharging and lately grown fashionable in high-density areas as a means of removing one's self from the effects of overpopulation. Scientists had recently documented that the vibrational level of a city past optimum density levels of electrochemical beings — people — was unhealthy. It was a constant stress, invisible, but as real as wind or smog. Want to add ten years to your life? Sleep more. No need to feel guilty about sacking out. Enjoy the deep slumber that sleeptrode pulse-units offered.

Lately I used sleep for yet another reason.

To remove myself . . . from myself.

Within a warm fog, a buzzer scolded me.

I blinked. The dim light of the sleep room was on. I rolled over, not yet fully awake. Sleep's small death released me reluctantly, leaving me without dreams to mark my passage back into life.

I had almost never dreamed, at least not dreams I could recall upon

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awakening, since I'd stopped writing and started using the sleeptrodes heavily. Jerrod the poet, once sought after by publishers and generally commended by critics, no longer had dreams to commit upon after his public. My time had passed; the spark had drowned — who knew that I had poured water on it myself? I had climbed an artistic mountain — and leaped off.

It wasn't Aleem's fault. I had gotten to the end of my song; that was all. As she was coming to the end of her song.

"Jerrod?"

Aleem was outside. She'd come looking for me. I nodded to myself. I had something she needed.

"Come in."

She eased inside, followed by the party's noise, and shut the door. I glanced at the room's chronometer. I'd been asleep only a couple of hours. Nearly 2400, the witching hour.

The thick quiet came back. She settled on the end of the cushion, and for a moment we looked silently at each other. I drew up my feet and sat cross-legged. The gel gently undulated.

"You're missing your party," I said at last.

She shook her head. "You know what I think of those . . . people."

"It's a zoo out there."

"You're not funny, Jerrod."

"I know. I wasn't trying to be."

She touched my knee. Her fingers were long and slim and delicate-looking, the first thing I'd noticed about her all those years ago. She looked sallow-cheecked in the weak light; her eyes brimmed with tears. "I know what you think of the showing," she said. "But one of us has to work. The residual rights from the tigers will —"

"—keep us fed and housed much better than my poetry," I finished. "As did the residuals to the chimp and the piranha and that stupid, ungrateful toucan —"

"Jerrod. . . ."

I shut up. We were slipping into that old hateful dance, its choreography too familiar, almost boring for all its internal violence. I'd tell her the money wasn't important; we could live without it; and if only — She'd say I couldn't understand any longer; I had given up that right; and if only —

The fight had been good the first time, alive and raw, and we'd made love

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afterward in our haste to reconnect ourselves. But the fight had long since become etched into dusty, mindless grooves. Always, it seemed, we started with better intentions, hoping somehow to exorcise our demons, but it never went that way; the troops were entrenched too deeply. *She* had sold out; *I* had given up; somewhere, somehow, *we* had lost everything. Each of us; and both of us.

"It . . . it was a good showing, wasn't it, Jerrod?"

The ritual question. And my answer, the one she had to have, the one small thing I could still give her: "The tigers were the best yet. I mean that." And they were — for what they were. More complex than the chimp or piranha or toucan, the tigers *were* better; not risky, not *art*, but excellent craftsmanship. She had discovered the formula her public would nurse on for as long as she wanted.

She nodded, put her head in her hands, and began crying. We were helpless together now; there was nothing I could say or do for either of us. I stepped from the now-oppressive silence into the babble of the party, leaving Aleem behind.

The party saddened and angered me even further. Couples and threesomes rutted in various forms of sexual activity on cushions and the rug. The curtains had been thrown open to the L.A. lights. The bulletproof glass kept out the city's accepted violence and suffocating, overcrowded chaos, the spin addicts and eight-year-old prostitutes and gangs willing to kill for black-market kidneys.

It kept in the terror of feeling lonely in a crowd.

Naked as a newborn, the ambassador staggered past me, waving the ultrasonic stimulator and grinning at the tigers, his electronic birthday present. A statuesque blonde gowned in glittersilks touched my shoulder and smiled. He/she was a morpho conversion, able to please with whatever genitals one might desire, but I turned away. I didn't want to be distracted by sex. I wanted the silence of a crematorium or a walk alone in cold acid rain. Quite the martyr.

I made my way past the animals, *all* the animals, to the bar. The tender suggested smoke, capsules or needles, but I settled for a drink the ambassador had had created especially for the party: an orange-on-orange mixture with the too-cute name of Annie's Amphetamine Antidote. It came in a pair of bulbs; the tender said you really shouldn't have one without the other.

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Like certain tigers.

Two months passed, a listless time suffused with ennui. Aleem and I seldom saw each other. When we did, I made small talk about how I might fly up and see my dad; but I never packed. She spoke of a new curry she intended to cook. She never cooked it; she hated cooking. Neither of us mentioned tigers. During those rare times when one of us felt desire and tenderness, the other never seemed to. We spent most of our time in our penthouse of the quakeproof high rise that jutted above the heavier ground smoke, and in our own rooms. Me in the bedroom, with the 'trodes. She in her studio, with whatever new animal masterpiece she'd undertaken.

On the evening of Aleem's next show, I heard crying from behind her door. I didn't know what she was working on; there'd been no cheeps or barks, and she never allowed anyone to view a work in progress. I hadn't seen her in four days. The quiet sobbing was like that of a child huddling in a closet after being punished for something she didn't do. Paradoxically, the sound triggered a memory of a time without tears. Standing outside the plastic door of her studio, I remembered our laughter when we'd visited the Mato Grosso and the Mbaya Indians — and saw the macaw.

WE HAD been young and twenty then, and answers were simple because questions were simple. Aleem was just out of CalArt, and I was flunking med school; we had little money and no prospects, just each other and a passion for art. We spent the summer living in the tiny apartment I'd constructed in the barn loft of my father's dairy near the base of Washington's Mount Adams. Between writing and painting and lovemaking, I helped Dad run the milkers while Aleem cooked — yes, cooked! — and canned and picked berries and exulted in the greenery and clean air. We were happy and stupid and in love, and we told each other we had it all; we had the world by the tail.

In the fall, we returned to L.A. so I could give med school a final try. We could always reboard the shuttle, we assured ourselves; Washington would always be there. Somehow, on a lark, we ended up heading to Brazil, to photograph hawkmoths and parrots and naked natives. Our cameras, though, were loaded with more than holoplates: I stole a few grams of the new drug, myelinglow, from my chem lab. It was being tested for visual-

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ization of nerve tissue. Though the drug could produce intense pain if not countered by chemical or electrical means, it was also psychoactive and psychedelic, and we had heard Brazil's Mbaya Indians used a cruder form of it in their religious ceremonies. The Indians, it was said, would pay almost anything for the pure stuff. We figured to take it up the Cuiabá River to trade for organic cocaine and mushroom dust and animistic art.

The Mbaya had ruled much of Brazil's interior centuries ago, keeping slaves and considering the conquering Portuguese unworthy of trade or even talk. Most remaining tribal members now lived in squalid towns bordering the bush. They sat on the dirt floors of their prefab huts and drank maté and watched the holoproj and rarely talked of *awyu*, the spirit of life.

Sometimes, though, as when someone smuggled in myelinglow, they slipped into the forest. There, in the old village, they danced and dreamed.

The jungle air was humid, a dense medium that hung like damp smoke amid the quebracho and soviera trees.

Sunlight that managed to break through the forest canopy seeped through the palm roof of the *biatemannageo* — the communal house — and dappled the native dancers. Reddened with *urucu* clay, they moved counterclockwise step and step and step, following the soft, lilting chant they all droned. Aleem and I lay naked together, stoked on the myelinglow the Mbaya shared with us, stoned on the barbituate vapors we used to ward off pain. Wearing crude Kirlian shatter-glasses the Indians made of *jacu* shells treated with rare organic earths and phosphor compounds, we watched the dancers' nervous systems flicker and spark, a dazzling nervebeat dance Aleem was later to translate and commercialize with her pulse-painted skin tracings on animals.

The Indians grinned and reached for us; trippy, we jumped to join them, their electric dances and ecstatic dreams spiraling us down to pleasant exhaustion. Then we sprawled on the ground outside the communal center; we watched spider-limbed coata monkeys chatter among the lianas and tendriled vines overhead. Under the drug's spell, we felt a thirdness between ourselves that went beyond simple synergy. Aleem would speak, and the words would appear as a thread between her lips, but I would have already sensed her thoughts, our brains attuned. I kept grinning at a large macaw, a riot of bright primary colors, that clicked and squawked on a branch above us, watching me as I watched him.

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"Other people need to . . . see this, Jerrod."

I watched an insect crawl across her stomach.

"I have to *show* it to them! In my art!"

I nodded. "But when we come down, you'll have . . . forgotten." The words, hard to push out, seemed useless and misleading. "The colors will dull, go . . . flat."

She turned toward me, all warmth and flesh. I was filled with desire. "No, there's a common de . . . nominator," she said, her words slurring. "Art, astronomy, philosophy, architecture — they're all expressions of the . . . same thing; don't you see?"

The sheen of sweat on her flesh fascinated me.

"It's like the difference between the medieval worldview," she went on. "Geocentrism, inductive reasoning, flat and one-dimensional paintings and cities without . . . interior design and — that of — God, I can't hold the thought; I'm losing it!"

I watched the shadows along her cheekbones and under her arms and shiny breasts break into shards as she ran her fingers through her long, ash hair.

"And then . . . then there was the heliocentric Renaissance with deduction and perspective and long avenues leading to the gardens of Versailles. Can't you *understand* , Jerrod?"

I lay my head in her lap and looked up at her face. "I love you."

She slid her fingers into my hair and smiled and kept talking. "Then, let's see . . . the nineteenth century. Structured. Steel girders and Spencer and Darwin. . . . She squinted, as if to see the idea better. "Then cubism and Einstein and skyscrapers with entrances but no front doors. The multisided universe. It all connects, Jerrod!"

I kissed her belly.

"Aren't you listening to me?" Her eyes seemed so clear and wide I could drown in them.

"You don't need to tell me in words," I said. "I know what you mean. Art doesn't . . . doesn't simply change." I had to force the words out. "Thinking and art change together. So as an artist, you need to discover how things fit, and flow with them — right?"

She took my face in her hands. "No, Jerrod — *lead*. That's what an artist does . . . *leads*."

I knew that. I nodded.

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The macaw laughed so hard he lost his perch and had to flutter to another branch. A feathered rainbow in the hot, diluted light.

The memory faded. I was staring sadly through our hallway's partially polarized window, down at the sad gray city, and listening to Aleem sob in her room. We had come too far since those days in Brazil, I realized. Not just Aleem and I — all of us. There seemed no room for art in a world where people did little but sleep, eat, use one another, and —

— let others cry.

"Aleem?"

She didn't answer.

"Aleem!"

"Go away, Jerrod." I could hear the pain in her voice.

"I won't. Open the door."

Quiet again, save for the soft crying.

"Open up, or I'll kick the damn thing down!"

After a time the latch hummed. The door slid open, and she stood staring vacantly at me.

I wasn't ready for what I saw.

She had depilated her entire body — head, crotch, axillae — and was erotically, hairlessly nude, except for the pulse-paint, which throbbed with a rhythm equal to her heartbeat. Her head was egg-smooth, even the brows and lashes gone; her art was her only adornment. My anatomy lessons came rushing back: red higher brain, blue medulla oblongata and pons. The spinal cord alternated in red and blue through its sections: red cervical, blue thoracic, red lumbar, ending in a blue-tipped filium terminale. Each pair of spinal nerves alternated likewise.

She'd also somehow managed to trace her peripheral nervous system. Hundreds and hundreds of lines decreased in size until they were hair-fine, a nearly invisible netting, from back to pulsing front.

I stepped back, startled, and the red and blue blended to purple with the extra distance.

It was incredible.

"I didn't want you to see it," she said. "Not yet." Her voice was strained, as if the words had trouble passing through the mesh of color that covered her lips. "But I don't know if I . . . if I can make it to the showing. I feel so tired. . . . " Her eyes rolled up in their glowing sockets, and her knees

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buckled. I lurched forward and caught her as she collapsed, and her weight pulled us back into her studio. I struggled to drag her to the couch, kicking aside expended hypostat tubes and paint-smeared towels. As I laid her down, the paint pulses began speeding up, going much too fast.

Aleem!

She gasped, her face distorted by more than paint. I realized what must have happened. The myelinglow would have caused her tremendous pain, especially with the doses she'd need to keep taking in order to paint herself. She'd been popping painkillers along with the myelinglow so she could work. Either she'd overdosed, or the combination of chemicals had thrown her system out of whack.

Her eyes fluttered open. "I had to trigger it for you, Jerrod. I know what you think of my work, but I had to —

"It's all right. Easy now."

Her face was pale where I could see it beneath the paint. Her skin felt clammy, and her pulse was rapid and thready. Even a med-school failure could recognize shock.

I propped her feet on a pillow and pulled the pink chenille cover from the back of the couch over her. I punched in the emergency code on her phone, babbled that I needed stat medical help, and started rubbing her arms and legs, trying to circulate the blood.

Far in the back of my mind, I heard something from a South American jungle, laughing at me.

Don't die Aleem. We haven't yet finished paving the road to Hell.

She came home five days later. She was polite and quiet, but there was something different about her. I couldn't tell what it was, and she wasn't disposed to tell me about it. The brief connection we'd had when I'd thought she was dying was gone.

That night, in my room, the sleeptrodes dangled over my bed like the pincers of a malevolent crab. The headset's platinum mesh looked alive; I could hear it calling: *Sleep, Jerrod. Let it all go. Forget. Sleep.*

I reached for them, with their easy, dreamless answers.

And remembered Aleem pulsing nakedly, dying.

I turned away from the sleep machinery. No. Not this time.

I walked across the hall and tapped on Aleem's door.

"Come in, Jerrod."

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"Listen," I said, at a loss for the right words. I, the poet. "I — we have to — there's got to be some way —" I waved my hands mutely, feeling like an idiot.

"I know." She took my hands in hers and looked at me solemnly. "We have to go back." As if that were possible.

I shook my head. Thomas Wolfe said it. You can't go home —

"I mean really go back," she said. "To the jungle. It all changed there, Jerrod. Somehow we got part of it, but we missed something. I don't know what. But *something*."

After a moment, I nodded. Maybe she was right.

We flew in, rather than hydrocrafting up the Cuiabá. The once-lush jungle was a patchwork of logging operations and farmland. The Mbaya Reserve, when we found it, had shrunken to a small fraction of its former size. It featured air-conditioned huts for the tourists, complete with jaguar-skin rugs and mint maté in frosted glasses decorated with little green parasols. A concrete macaw as large as a house hulked above rides such as the Amzonian Fear Wheel and the Barrel O'Monkeys. Mustached boys in parrot-colored suits and girls wearing baskets of fake fruit on their heads sold tickets and trinkets. Dances were twice daily, the dancers fully clothed. No drugs, no shatter-glasses, no *awyu*. The grandsons of Disney had entered the jungle and given it a G rating.

Aleem looked as sick as I felt. I thought about the 'trodes in my luggage, and started toward the reception area. I'd get a room — and sleep.

Aleem grabbed my arm. "Come on!"

I stared at her. "Where?"

She helped me grab our stuff, and led me to a dock where big plastic canoes were lined up. We rented one and puttered out into the lagoon. "Aleem. . . ."

"Look for a stream. There's bound to be something feeding this concrete pond."

I looked. Eventually I spotted the feeder stream. A metal gate of wide mesh blocked the entrance to the fake lagoon. Aleem found a heavy plastic paddle in the bottom of the canoe, raised it over her head, and began smashing the small lock. She swung the paddle as if it were an ax and she were back on my father's farm, in another life. There was a fury in her, a passion I hadn't seen in years. The lock stood between her and escape.

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After eight or ten blows, pieces of the green plastic flew off into the too-blue water, but Aleem kept hammering away. I could only watch, frozen by her passion.

The lock gave before the paddle did.

Aleem sat back, flushed and sweating, and dropped the ruined paddle into the bottom of the canoe.

I pulled the gate aside. It squealed in protest. I gunned the motor — we were through!

We didn't speak, but I felt close to her.

We passed through kilometer after kilometer of narrow channels infested with swamp grass and gnats. We twisted the canoe around logs, down steamy passages, over lilies and thick scum. Finally the stream widened, and we came to a clearing with several collapsed huts in it. I pulled the canoe into the shore and got out. It was twilight. Mosquitoes buzzed around us, but didn't alight — the canoe had a portable repeller, which we carried ashore. In the distance the lights of the park touched the gathering darkness. We were not as far away as we'd thought, or hoped.

I sat on a log and stared at the destroyed huts.

"It's the old village," Aleem said, gazing at the tipped-down roofs of shriveled palm thatch and broken bamboo rafters. "There's the *biatemannageo.*" She pointed. "It had aluminum casings where the poles fit together."

"I didn't think you remembered those days all that clearly, what with the drugs and all."

"You don't know me very well."

"Maybe I don't." I felt like laughing bitterly. We were back, but were different people — as different as the village. And perhaps as deteriorated.

She started propping up a roof for a lean-to. I watched for a while, then took our luggage from the canoe and started a small fire. We were staying, by unvoiced consent.

We didn't talk much as we worked, but whenever I looked at her, she smiled. We rethatched the roof and raised it at an angle to shield us from the distant carnival lights. We picked plantains and dug *cheebo* root and boiled some of the mucky water to cook the plantains and make some tea. We laid down part of the roof as a ticking. That night, Aleem put a scarlet liana blossom in her hair and settled down beside me. "We're back," she said. *Back together,* I knew she meant. "Do you remember how it was then,

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how we danced? How we used the shatter-glasses to watch each other's nervous systems? Wonderful. And I told myself, 'If I can capture this in art, then surely I'll have discovered our age's common denominator, the symbol of a self-centered world.' No one touches anymore. Not really. No one touches nature or each other. If I could show people that, by letting them view the nervebeats of animals and —" Her voice broke slightly. "— and finally of the artist herself — But I didn't get it right, Jerrod. I know that now. All I got was easy repetition, without risk."

I said nothing, and we lay looking up at the dark, moon-drenched foliage. "I think I'd like to try the 'trodes tonight," she said at last, softly. "And I'd like you to try some myelinglow. A light dose, like the Mbaya used to take. Like *we* used to take."

"I hope you're kidding."

"We've rarely experienced each other's addiction. Maybe that's been our trouble."

If it would placate her, if it would help us — O.K.

Aleem used the 'trodes. As I waited for the injected myelinglow to take effect, I watched her restless sleep. She tossed and turned on the ticking, and I wondered if her 'trode-spun slumber was dreamless, as mine always had been.

"Dancers!" I heard her mutter once.

Then the drug brought its bright dreams, wonderful spashes of color that swirled through the darkness, meaning everything and nothing. In the center of those reds and blues, I briefly envisioned Aleem emerge from a restored *biatemannageo* and walk toward me, a gold-and-honey twenty-year-old who was unselfconscious of her nude beauty. "I think I've found something, Jerrod." She smiled as she spoke, the words serpentining from her mouth and winding up among the quebracho branches. "It has to do with the myelinglow. The Mbaya are vague about it. I can't always follow what they're saying for all the riddles and laughter, but it has to do with shared experience, and dreams —" Then I heard the squawking of a macaw and the gibbering of monkeys.

I opened my eyes. Aleem had hung an old-fashioned 3-D easel from the corner of the lean-to and was busy with a holoproj painting. It was a smear of color, blues and greens intertwined with silvers. An abstract, and Aleem never painted abstracts.

She looked troubled, frowning at the painting. "You slept nearly

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fourteen hours." She didn't look at me, only at the picture.

"It's the heat."

She eyed the holo across the top of her aerosol brush, and suddenly her face flushed with anger. "Just not right! I thought I — Damn!" She threw down the brush and stalked off between the trees.

"Aleem?"

"Leave me alone, Jerrod. I mean it!"

That evening, she emerged from the jungle and returned to the easel. She pressed the recycler; the colors vibrated and were sucked into the easel's base. She didn't speak. Just stood staring at the blank screen.

I hooked up a 'trode set to our luggage's power pac, turned the intensity to high, lay down on the ticking, and awaited oblivion. . . .

A macaw called from a tall tree whose fronds were swept-back scythes. I stood on spongy ground, my arms extended toward the bird. His rainbow wings beat the air slowly — oh so slowly! — and his talons released the limb as he rose through the gluey air. I wanted to speak to him, touch him, feel his feathers under my fingers. I yearned upward —

— and found myself in the trees, clutching the limb where the macaw had been. My hands slipped, and I hung upside down, my legs looped over another limb; I was a giant sloth.

— monkeys gibbered around me. Jacus *and* japim *burst cawing from the treetops.*

— on the ground, mop-headed and urucu*-reddened Mbaya yelled and waved their spears. Did they want me? The macaw? Maybe the monkeys?*

— rainbow bird returned and alighted on the limb by my knee. His big beak explored its shoulder, searching for lice. He preened, smoothing down feathers on his left wing. He had Aleem's green eyes.

— with one hand, I reached for the macaw, lost my grip with my legs —!

— tumbled down through a star-speckled universe, lost, alone, desolate, despairing —

— Aleem caught me! She wore a rainbow-colored dress, and her green eyes glowed with supernal light. She swept us sideways, and we became a comet blazing through cobalt-blue skies. She smiled, and her face shattered into twinkling shards of diamond and ice and love —

* * *

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JERROD."

I blinked and saw Aleem standing over me. The sun was high, and she looked tired, but never so alive.

"You dreamed," she said.

I rubbed my eyes. "It was so *real,* so incredibly vivid!" I sat up. "I — I never dream on sleeptrodes." I stared up at her as the second part of the question came to life. "How'd you know I dreamed? How could you?"

She knelt and turned up my forearm. A small red circle showed inside my elbow. The print of a hypo-pop.

"Forgive me," she said. "I had to do it."

I shook my head, and she answered my unspoken question.

"Myelinglow."

"All right. But — why?"

She turned and pointed at the easel. The spun acrylics were still wet and glistening and —

It was the macaw.

My macaw, from my dream, perched in a quebracho tree.

Impossible!

"I dreamed that," I said. I pointed at the holo. "That painting . . . triggered my dream?"

She shook her head.

"What, then!"

She was quivering, her gaze intent as she looked at the bird. "It's the myelinglow. It allows you to share someone else's dream. That's why the Mbaya used it, not to watch the dancing nervous systems! We got caught up in the externals and missed the point. We assumed the mild hallucinations were just that, pleasant little drug dreams, and that the real artistic value was the viewing of the pretty lines of nerve tissue. How self-centered could we have been!" She sighed noisily. "It must be a kind of telepathy, perhaps strengthened by the participants seeing each other's nerves. Like biofeedback, maybe. I don't know. I know only that when I wore the 'trodes the night before last, I had a lucid dream. I knew I was dreaming — and I *felt* I was dreaming someone else's dream."

"You've probably still got some myelinglow in your system, as much as you shot up back in L.A."

She nodded. "That's what I figured, too. I got up and tried to paint what I was seeing, but I couldn't sustain the images." She glanced at the macaw,

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and looked away angrily. "Then, last night, you opted for the 'trodes, and I realized that with a direct link, a second mesh tied into that of the sleeper, and the delta filtered out. . . .

I stood and studied the macaw. The implications began bubbling up in my brain.

"I took a small dose of the drug and let my mind blank, linked to your sleeping mind," she said. "That's what I saw. The macaw. And it's. . . ."

Her voice filled with quiet horror.

"Oh my God."

Her eyes suddenly looked as lifeless as the afternoon in her studio. I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "What's wrong!"

"It's awful, Jerrod. The whole idea." Her eyes welled with tears. "I wanted to share something with you, but it's more than that; can't you see? I painted the bird, but it's *your* macaw — your vision!"

Then I understood. If the painting wasn't a fluke, *if* it could be repeated, then Aleem had discovered another, and even more dispiriting, art form symbolic of our self-centered age. By combining myelinglow with the sleeptrodes, an artist would be no more than an instrument to actualize the dreamer's conception.

"People will swarm over the idea," she said. "They'll fall all over themselves to get *their* thoughts into paint. It's just like the last time we were here, when we rushed back to L.A. so I could paint nervous systems — only to end up repeating myself, and hating myself. I acted without thinking things through. I should never have hooked into your dream, Jerrod. I should never have painted that . . . *thing*!"

I said nothing.

"Wipe it," she said.

"Aleem. . . ." I looked at the painting. It was beautiful.

"Clean the damn thing off! We have to keep this to ourselves. Jerrod. No one must ever know."

I reached for the tab on the easel control. In an instant the spun colors would blend and run back into the reservoir, to be reused again —

I saw it then.

The macaw had blue eyes. Blue, not green.

"I'm not going to do it."

She moved toward the easel. "Then I will!"

Again I grabbed her. "Wait, look at the bird's eyes!" Now I could see

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other differences from the macaw I'd dreamed. The colors weren't quite the same, and the patterns and saber-shaped tail were different. "It *is* your vision!"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"My macaw had *green* eyes. And the tree had broader leaves. The sky, too — it was darker, and without that hint of reddish sunset. This bird is cleaner, sharper, much more than the one I saw. It's yours as much as mine; it sprang from both of us."

Aleem looked from the painting to me, and back again. "You're sure?"

"Yes! Do you know what that means?"

She gazed at the macaw a long time, a look of hope growing in her eyes. She nodded, put her arms around my waist, and smiled.

Maybe it was the myelinglow, and I was being a dreamy optimist, but I decided that — at least for Aleem and me — the macaw symbolized more than a manifestation of a self-centered world; it was a reaction against it. No longer could viewers recline before their holoprojes and admire or criticize without seeing a work's essence. Perhaps someday the artist and audience would no longer enjoy the easy freedom of separation. A painting might be a participation.

And the sleeptrodes coupled with myelinglow . . . what if that was an initial image for what the world really sought and might soon realize: not self, but sharing? Perhaps civilization did indeed possess the hope, and the beginning of the capacity, to arrive where the Mbaya had come from.

My heart pounded with excitement, and for the first time in years, I felt a desire to put words on paper for others to read. (An old art form, I know; but then, I felt older than when I had awakened.) Not the lifeless lines I'd been writing before I'd quit, but something squalling and squawking, imbued with energy and verve, precarious, out on a limb.

A poem in Aleem's honor — but not for her art.

For *us*.

Words about a winged rainbow whose colors were blended.

And splendid.

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SCIENCE

BRUCE STERLING

INTERNET

SOME THIRTY years ago, the RAND Corporation, America's foremost Cold War think-tank, faced a strange strategic problem. How could the U.S. authorities successfully communicate after a nuclear war?

Postnuclear America would need a command-and-control network, linked from city to city, state to state, base to base. But no matter how thoroughly that network was armored or protected, its switches and wiring would always be vulnerable to the impact of atomic bombs. A nuclear attack would reduce any conceivable network to tatters.

And how could the network itself be commanded and controlled? Any central authority, any network central citadel, would be an obvious and immediate target for an enemy missile. The center of the network would be the very first place to go.

RAND mulled over this grim puzzle in deep military secrecy, and arrived at a daring solution. The RAND proposal (the brainchild of RAND staffer Paul Baran) was made public in 1964. In the first place, the network would *have no central authority*. Furthermore, it would be *designed from the beginning to operate while in tatters.*

The principles were simple. The network itself would be assumed to be unreliable at all times. It would be designed from the get-go to transcend its own unreliability. All the nodes in the network would be equal in status to all other nodes, each node with its own authority to originate, pass, and receive messages. The messages themselves would be divided into packets, each packet separately addressed. Each packet would begin at some specified source node, and end at some other specified destination node. Each packet would wind its way through the network on an individual basis.

The particular route that the packet took would be unimportant.

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Only final results would count. Basically, the packet would be tossed like a hot potato from node to node to node, more or less in the direction of its destination, until it ended up in the proper place. If big pieces of the network had been blown away, that simply wouldn't matter; the packets would still stay airborne, latteralled wildly across the field by whatever nodes happened to survive. This rather haphazard delivery system might be "inefficient" in the usual sense (especially compared to, say, the telephone system)—but it would be extremely rugged.

During the '60s, this intriguing concept of a decentralized, blast-proof, packet-switching network was kicked around by RAND, MIT and UCLA. The National Physical Laboratory in Great Britain set up the first test network on these principles in 1968. Shortly afterward, the Pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency decided to fund a larger, more ambitious project in the USA. The nodes of the network were to be high-speed supercomputers (or what passed for supercomputers at the time). These were rare and valuable machines which were in real need of good solid networking, for the sake of national research-and-development projects.

In fall of 1969, the first such node was installed in UCLA. By December 1969, there were four nodes on the infant network, which was named ARPANET, after its Pentagon sponsor.

The four computers could transfer data on dedicated high-speed transmission lines. They could even be programmed remotely from the other nodes. Thanks to ARPANET, scientists and researchers could share one another's computer facilities by long-distance. This was a very handy service, for computer-time was precious in the early '70s. In 1971 there were fifteen nodes in ARPANET; by 1972, thirty-seven nodes. And it was good.

By the second year of operation, however, an odd fact became clear. ARPANET's users had warped the computer-sharing network into a dedicated, high-speed, federally subsidized electronic post-office. The main traffic on ARPANET was not long-distance computing. Instead, it was news and personal messages. Researchers were using ARPANET to collaborate on projects, to trade notes on work, and eventually, to downright gossip and schmooze. People had their own personal user accounts on the ARPANET computers, and their own personal addresses for electronic mail. Not only were they using ARPANET for person-to-person communication, but they were very enthusiastic about this particular service — far

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more enthusiastic than they were about long-distance computation.

It wasn't long before the invention of the mailing-list, an ARPANET broadcasting technique in which an identical message could be sent automatically to large numbers of network subscribers. Interestingly, one of the first really big mailing-lists was "SF-LOVERS," for science fiction fans. Discussing science fiction on the network was not work-related and was frowned upon by many ARPANET computer administrators, but this didn't stop it from happening.

Throughout the '70s, ARPA's network grew. Its decentralized structure made expansion easy. Unlike standard corporate computer networks, the ARPA network could accommodate many different kinds of machine. As long as individual machines could speak the packet-switching lingua franca of the new, anarchic network, their brand-names, and their content, and even their ownership, were irrelevant.

The ARPA's original standard for communication was known as NCP, "Network Control Protocol," but as time passed and the technique advanced, NCP was superceded by a higher-level, more sophisticated standard known as TCP/IP. TCP, or "Transmission Control Protocol," converts messages into streams of packets at the source, then reassembles them back into messages at the destination. IP, or "Internet Protocol," handles the addressing, seeing to it that packets are routed across multiple nodes and even across multiple networks with multiple standards — not only ARPA's pioneering NCP standard, but others like Ethernet, FDDL, and X25.

As early as 1977, TCP/IP was being used by other networks to link to ARPANET. ARPANET itself remained fairly tightly controlled, at least until 1983, when its military segment broke off and became MILNET. But TCP/IP linked them all. And ARPANET itself, though it was growing, became a smaller and smaller neighborhood amid the vastly growing galaxy of other linked machines.

As the '70s and '80s advanced, many very different social groups found themselves in possession of powerful computers. It was fairly easy to link these computers to the growing network-of-networks. As the use of TCP/IP became more common, entire other networks fell into the digital embrace of the Internet, and messily adhered. Since the software called TCP/IP was public-domain, and the basic technology was decentralized and rather anarchic by its very nature, it was difficult to stop people from barging in and linking up somewhere-or-

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other. In point of fact, nobody *wanted* to stop them from joining this branching complex of networks, which came to be known as the "Internet."

Connecting to the Internet cost the taxpayer little or nothing, since each node was independent, and had to handle its own financing and its own technical requirements. The more, the merrier. Like the phone network, the computer network became steadily more valuable as it embraced larger and larger territories of people and resources.

A fax machine is only valuable if *everybody else* has a fax machine. Until they do, a fax machine is just a curiosity. ARPANET, too was a curiosity for a while. Then computer-networking became an utter necessity.

In 1984 the National Science Foundation got into the act, through its Office of Advanced Scientific Computing. The new NSFNET set a blistering pace for technical advancement, linking newer, faster, shinier supercomputers, through thicker, faster links, upgraded and expanded, again and again, in 1986, 1988, 1990. And other government agencies leapt in: NASA, the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Energy, each of them maintaining a digital satrapy in the Internet confederation.

The nodes in this growing network-of-networks were divvied up into basic varieties. Foreign computers, and a few American ones, chose to be denoted by their geographical locations. The others were grouped by the six basic Internet "domains": gov, mil, edu, com, org and net. (Graceless abbreviations such as this are a standard feature of the TCP/IP protocols.) Gov, Mil, and Edu denoted governmental, military and educational institutions, which were, of course, the pioneers, since ARPANET had begun as a high-tech research exercise in national security. Com, however, stood for "commercial" institutions, which were bursting into the network like rodeo bulls, surrounded by a dust-cloud of eager non-profit "orgs." (The "net" computers served as gateways between networks.)

ARPANET itself formally expired in 1989, a happy victim of its own overwhelming success. Its users scarcely noticed, for ARPANET's functions not only continued but steadily improved. The use of TCP/IP standards for computer networking is now global. In 1971, a mere twenty-one years ago, there were only four nodes in the ARPANET network. Today there are tens of thousands of nodes in the Internet, scattered over forty-two countries, with more coming online every day. Three million, possibly four million people use this

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gigantic mother-of-all-computer-networks.

The Internet is especially popular among scientists, and is probably the most important scientific instrument of the late twentieth century. The powerful, sophisticated access that it provides to specialized data and personal communication has sped up the pace of scientific research enormously.

The Internet's pace of growth in the early 1990s is spectacular, almost ferocious. It is spreading faster than cellular phones, faster than fax machines. Last year the Internet was growing at a rate of twenty percent a *month*. The number of "host" macines with direct connection to TCP/IP has been doubling every year since 1988. The Internet is moving out of its original base in military and research institutions, into elementary and high schools, as well as into public libraries and the commercial sector.

Why do people want to be "on the Internet?" One of the main reasons is simple freedom. The internet is a rare example of a true, modern functional anarchy. There is no "Internet Inc." There are no official censors, no bosses, no board of directors, no stockholders. In principle, any node can speak as a peer to any other node, as long as it obeys the rules of the TCP/IP protocols, which are strictly technical, not social or political. (There has been some struggle over commercial use of the Internet, but that situation is changing as businesses supply their own links).

The Internet is also a bargain. The Internet as a whole, unlike the phone system, doesn't charge for long-distance. And unlike most commercial computer networks, it doesn't charge for access time, either. In fact the "Internet" itself, which doesn't even officially exist as an entity, never "charges" for anything. Each group of people accessing the Internet is responsible for their own machine and their own section of line.

The Internet's "anarchy" may seem strange or even unnatural, but it makes a certain deep and basic sense. It's rather like the "anarchy" of the English language. Nobody rents English, and nobody owns English. As an English-speaking person, it's up to you to learn how to speak English properly and make whatever use you please of it (though the government provides certain subsidies to help you learn to read and write a bit). Otherwise, everybody just sort of pitches in, and somehow the thing evolves on its own, and somehow turns out workable. And interesting. Fascinating, even. Though a lot of people earn their living from using and

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exploiting and teaching English, "English" as an institution is public property, a public good. Much the same goes for the Internet. Would English be improved if "The English Language, Inc." had a board of directors and a chief executive officer, or a President and a Congress? There'd probably be a lot fewer new words in English, and a lot fewer new ideas.

People on the Internet feel much the same way about their own institution. It's an institution that resists institutionalization. The Internet belongs to everyone and no one.

Still, its various interest groups all have a claim. Business people want the Internet put on a sounder financial footing. Government people want the Internet more fully regulated. Academics want it dedicated exclusively to scholarly research. Military people want it spyproof and secure. And so on and so on.

All of these sources of conflict remain in a stumbling balance today, and the Internet, so far, remains in a thrivingly anarchical condition. Once upon a time, the NSFnet's high-speed, high-capacity lines were known as the "Internet Backbone," and their owners could rather lord it over the rest of the Internet; but today there are "backbones" in Canada, Japan, and Europe, and even privately owned commercial Internet backbones specially created for carrying business traffic. Today, even privately owned desktop computers can become Internet nodes. You can carry one under your arm. Soon, perhaps, on your wrist.

But what does one *do* with the Internet? Four things, basically: mail, discussion groups, long-distance computing, and file transfers.

Internet mail is "e-mail," electronic mail, faster by several orders of magnitude than the US Mail, which is scornfully known by Internet regulars as "snailmail." Internet mail is somewhat like fax. It's electronic text. But you don't have to pay for it (at least not directly), and it's global in scope. E-mail can also send software and certain forms of compressed digital imagery. New forms of mail are in the works.

The discussion groups, or "newsgroups," are a world of their own. This world of news, debate and argument is generally known as "USENET." USENET is, in point of fact, quite different from the Internet. USENET is rather like an enormous billowing crowd of gossipy, news-hungry people, wandering in and through the Internet on their way to various private backyard barbecues. USENET is not so much a physical network as a set of social conventions. In any case,

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at the moment there are some 2,500 separate newsgroups on USENET, and their discussions generate about 7 millions words of typed commentary every single day. Naturally there is a vast amount of talk about computers on USENET, but the variety of subjects discussed is enormous, and it's growing larger all the time. USENET also distributes various free electronic journals and publications.

Both netnews and e-mail are very widely available, even outside the high-speed core of the Internet itself. News and e-mail are easily available over common phone-lines, from Internet fringe-realms like BITnet, UUCP and Fidonet. The last two Internet services, long-distance computing and file transfer, require what is known as "direct Internet access" — using TCP/IP.

Long-distance computing was an original inspiration for ARPANET and is still a very useful service, at least for some. Programmers can maintain accounts on distant, powerful computers, run programs there or write their own. Scientists can make use of powerful supercomputers a continent away. Libraries offer their electronic card catalogs for free search. Enormous CD-ROM catalogs are increasingly available through this service. And there are fantastic amounts of free software available.

File transfers allow Internet users to access remote machines and retrieve programs or text. Many Internet computers — some two thousand of them so far — allow any person to access them anonymously, and to simply copy their public files, free of charge. This is no small deal, since entire books can be transferred through direct Internet access in a matter of minutes. Today, in 1992, there are over a million such public files available to anyone who asks for them (and many more millions of files are available to people with accounts). Internet file-transfers are becoming a new form of publishing, in which the reader simply electronically copies the work on demand, in any quantity he or she wants, for free. New Internet programs, such as "archie," "gopher," and "WAIS," have been developed to catalog and explore these enormous archives of material.

The headless, anarchic, million-limbed Internet is spreading like bread-mold. Any computer of sufficient power is a potential spore for the Internet, and today such computers sell for less than $2,000 and are in the hands of people all over the world. ARPA's network, designed to assure control of a ravaged society after a nuclear holocaust, has been superceded by its mutant child the Internet, which is thorough-

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ly out of control, and spreading exponentially through the post-Cold War electronic global village. The spread of the Internet in the '90s resembles the spread of personal computing in the 1970s, though it is even faster and perhaps more important. More important, perhaps, because it may give those personal computers a means of cheap, easy storage and access that is truly planetary in scale.

The future of the Internet bids fair to be bigger and exponentially faster. Commercialization of the Internet is a very hot topic today, with every manner of wild new commercial information-service promised. The federal government, pleased with an unsought success, is also still very much in the act. NREN, the National Research and Education Network, was approved by the US Congress in fall 1991, as a five-year, $2 billion project to upgrade the Internet "backbone." NREN will be some fifty times faster than the fastest network available today, allowing the electronic transfer of the entire Encyclopaedia Britannica in one hot second. Computer networks worldwide will feature 3-D animated graphics, radio and cellular phone-links to portable computers, as well as fax, voice, and high-definition television. A multimedia global circus!

Or so it's hoped — and planned. The real Internet of the future may bear very little resemblance to today's plans. Planning has never seemed to have much to do with the seething, fungal development of the Internet. After all, today's Internet bears little resemblance to those original grim plans for RAND's post-holocaust command grid. It's a fine and happy irony.

How does one get access to the Internet? Well — if you don't have a computer and a modem, get one. Your computer can act as a terminal, and you can use an ordinary telephone line to connect to an Internet-linked machine. These slower and simpler adjuncts to the Internet can provide you with the netnews discussion groups and your own e-mail address. These are services worth having — though if you only have mail and news, you're not actually "on the Internet" proper.

If you're on a campus, your university may have direct "dedicated access" to high-speed Internet TCP/IP lines. Apply for an Internet account on a dedicated campus machine, and you may be able to get those hot-dog long-distance computing and file transfer functions. Some cities, such as Cleveland, supply "freenet" community access. Businesses increasingly have Internet access, and are willing to sell it

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to subscribers. The standard fee is about $40 a month — about the same as TV cable service.

As the Nineties proceed, finding a link to the Internet will become much cheaper and easier. Its ease of use will also improve, which is fine news, for the savage UNIX interface of TCP/IP leaves plenty of room for advancements in user-friendliness. Learning the Internet now, or at least learning about it, is wise. By the turn of the century, "network literacy," like "computer literacy" before it, will be forcing itself into the very texture of your life.

For Further Reading:

The Whole Internet Catalog & User's Guide by Ed Krol. (1992) O'Reilly and Associates, Inc. A clear, non-jargonized introduction to the intimidating business of network literacy. Many computer-documentation manuals attempt be be funny. Mr. Krol's book is *actually* funny.

The Matrix: Computer Networks and Conferencing Systems Worldwide, by John Quarterman. Digital Press: Bedford, MA. (1990) Massive and highly technical compendium detailing the mind-boggling scope and complexity of our newly networked planet.

The Internet Companion by Tracy LaQuey with Jeanne C. Ryer (1992) Addison Wesley. Evangelical etiquette guide to the Internet featuring anecdotal tales of life-changing Internet experiences. Foreword by Senator Al Gore.

Zen and the Art of the Internet: A Beginner's Guide by Brendan P. Kehoe (1992) Prentice Hall. Brief but useful Internet guide with plenty of good advice on useful machines to paw over for data. Mr. Kehoe's guide bears the singularly wonderful distinction of being available in electronic form free of charge. I'm doing the same with all my F&SF Science articles, including, of course, this one. My own Internet address is bruces@well.sf.ca.us.

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Hugo and Nebula winner Kate Wilhelm has recently turned her attention to mysteries. Still, her mysteries have an sf flavor. Her most recent novel in paperback, Death Qualified, *deals with chaos theory. St. Martin's Press has just published her latest novel,* Seven Kinds of Death, *and she has turned in another,* Justice for Some. *"Naming the Flowers" also combines mystery, suspense and science fiction. It's a gripping tale that shows Kate at the top of her form.*

Naming the Flowers

By Kate Wilhelm

LATE IN SEPTEMBER I told the crew at Phoenix Publishing Company that I had had it, I was taking off, I might never be heard from again and for them not to send the cops out looking for me. Gracie Blanchard, my secretary, laughed and said, "Oh, Win. Go on." Then she asked how many cameras I was taking, and Phil Delacourt, the general manager, said he had been practicing my signature until he could forge it on anything that came in. But if I was heading north, he added, he could whip out a list of people I probably should see about this and that. I told him what to do with his list.

We had finished a big catalog job, and the Christmas catalogs were long gone; the pharmaceuticals were on schedule, even ahead of schedule, and I was tired. And bored. When I started Phoenix seven years ago, it was exciting, but over the past few years it had turned into deadlines, messed-up print runs, back orders of paper that never arrived, photographs that were out-of-focus. . . . The usual fuckups, people told me, the same people

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who told me seven years ago that I couldn't publish out of Atlanta; all the talent was in New York.

I had no real plans, no itinerary; I simply knew I wanted to be in New England when the foliage was at its best. I would call in now and then, I said to Gracie; keep the fires banked. I took off in my twelve-year-old Thunderbird with a suitcase, hiking gear, half a dozen books, and four cameras. I didn't tell Gracie about the cameras; I didn't want to see her dimply, knowing smile. Gracie's cute and twenty-five years old. It had alarmed me the day I realized that she seemed terribly young. I was thirty-eight.

I drove along the blue ridges of the Appalachians, and spent a couple of days hiking, but it was too early. The trees would be better on my return trip. I cut over to the coast and paid a call on Atlantic City. I hadn't been there for years and I didn't want to linger this time. I was just curious about how much it had changed, but I made the mistake of arriving on Sunday and when I was ready to leave, so were a million others. I checked into a hotel instead, and then walked along the beach where it seemed that more than a million kids were playing, enjoying Indian summer. One of them, a little girl, began to walk at my side. I looked at her uneasily, and then looked around for a mother, father, someone.

"Can I have an ice cream?" the child asked. We had drawn near a vendor.

"Where's your mommy?" I asked the kid, as I fished out a dollar. She shrugged and gestured toward the casinos. I bought her an ice-cream stick, and she walked with me for a few more yards, and then smiled and darted away. I walked faster. A man just doesn't buy ice cream for strange little girls, I was thinking, not if he wants to stay out of trouble. Then I noticed one of the bridges and thought how fine it would look in the early-morning sunlight.

The next morning I returned with my old Leica and sat on a wall waiting for the light. The same little girl appeared and held up her hands for me to hoist her up to the wall.

"Honey," I said, after she was settled, "didn't your mom tell you not to talk to strangers?" She giggled. It was a cool morning, too cool for her lightweight sweater which was too big and too loose on her, and she was too big not to know better than to pick up men and be this trusting with them. I scanned the beach looking for a distraught mother, and saw only a couple of kids playing, a few people strolling, a jogger. I stood up. "I've got to go now," I said. She held out her arms for me to help her down; I lifted

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her and set her on the sand. I should take her to the police, I was thinking, turn her in, a lost child. Then, to my relief, a group of women appeared, heading our way, and she began to run toward them. The idea of the bridge in sunlight was dead; the light had come and gone again. I left, and that afternoon I was wandering around Gettysburg.

In the car, meandering northward, I played Bach fugues and Sibelius and did not turn on the radio; in the motels I read Fuentes or García Márquez or Don DeLillo, or a biography of Mann, and did not turn on the television.

On Wednesday night, near Middletown, New York, when I got back to the motel after dinner, a man was waiting for me, lounging against a black Ford. He straightened as I approached.

"Mr. Seton? Winston Seton?"

Not a mugger, I thought; they don't name the victim first. I nodded.

"May I have a few words with you? I'm Jeremy Kersh, FBI."

He flicked open his I.D. and I wondered which had come first, the many TV agents flicking open the same kind of I.D., or the event itself. I shrugged and opened my door, and he followed me inside.

He had a round, soft-looking face, too pink and too smooth, as if he had to shave every third day if that often, and the build that puts more bulk below the waist than above it, but I suspected he was not as soft as he looked. I motioned him to a chair, and crossed in front of him to get to the low dressing table where I had a bucket of ice cubes and a bottle of bourbon. He drew in his legs to let me pass. It was the kind of motel that had two chairs, a tiny round table with a hanging lamp that you brained yourself on frequently, a king-sized bed, and the dresser with a big mirror.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Kersh?" I asked, taking the shrink wrap off a glass. "Drink?" I eyed the bottle and hoped he would say no; after six days there wasn't much left. He said no, and I poured myself bourbon, added ice cubes, and edged past him to sit on the side of the bed. He sat with his legs apart, his hands on his knees, leaning forward. He looked uncomfortable.

"You've been following the story about the crash of the Milliken Learjet, I suppose," he said. I shook my head, and for a moment he appeared confused, as if his game plan had been scrapped without warning. "You know who Joe Milliken is, don't you?" he asked then.

Every kid knew about Bluebeard, Beauty and the Beast, Jack the Giant Killer, the Hope diamond, the Milliken millions. . . . I nodded.

"O.K., Mr. Seton. As soon as you open a news magazine, or turn on the

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television news, or see a paper, you'll get some version of the story. I'll give you ours. Two years ago Milliken's daughter and her baby vanished, and Milliken said it was a kidnapping. Brought us in. We haven't come up with mother or child in all this time, and the case is as open as the Montana sky, as far as we're concerned."

I held up my hand as memory of the event seeped into consciousness. "I read that the mother took her child and left of her own accord."

"You could have read a lot of things," Kersh said with a shrug. "He, the old man, says they were kidnapped. There's been no note, no ransom demand, nothing. Even so, it's on the books, unsolved. To complicate things, when mother and child vanished, so did all their hospital records, the child's prints, blood type, everything. O.K. Two weeks ago Mr. Milliken got a phone call, a woman said she had his granddaughter, and that she had sent him a picture that should arrive any minute now. She said she would call back, and hung up. He called our office in Houston, and our men were there when the picture arrived, a Polaroid of a kid with brown eyes and light hair. Like a million other kids. But also like his daughter at that age. He said it was her, his granddaughter. End of argument."

Kersh sighed; he looked tired, as if the past two weeks had been tough. "I'll cut it short," he said then. "Milliken and the woman struck a deal. She would deliver the kid to him in Houston, no one else, and he called us off, just like that. They planned for her to bring the kid to him in one of his Learjets. His pilot told him they'd had trouble with the electrical system and he blew up. He wanted that kid in that plane and on her way to Houston right now. So a week ago last night we stood with our thumbs in our mouths and watched a woman and a man take a little girl aboard the Milliken plane in Philadelphia. We had planes in the area and planned to track them every inch of the way, be there when that jet landed. But half an hour out of Philadelphia the pilot got on the radio; he said something was wrong with the electrical system, and then silence. It went down."

Kersh had left his chair restlessly; he looked like a man who wanted to stamp around and found it frustrating that there wasn't enough room. I thought he wanted a drink, but didn't make the offer a second time. He glanced inside the bathroom, the tiny dressing area, and came back to stand at the foot of the bed with his hands deep in his pockets.

"We recovered the bodies of three women, two attendants and the other woman, and three men, pilot, co-pilot, the man who boarded with the

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woman and child. No kid," he said, scowling. "We had people there within minutes, the whole area was being covered within half an hour or so, but no kid." His eyes had appeared unfocused, now he turned his attention to me. "And you haven't seen it on the news, read about it?"

I shook my head. "What do you want with me, Mr. Kersh?" I asked patiently. "It's an interesting story, and I'll catch up with it in the papers any day now. Why are you here?"

"We want to enlist your help," he said; his attitude, that had suggested nothing more than fatigue a second ago, had become harder, not menacing, but not yielding either.

I wondered if other agents were out in the parking lot, if a chase car was nearby. I had to laugh to myself at the full-blown scenario that had come to mind. I sipped my drink and waited.

"We think you talked with the child at least twice in Atlantic City," Kersh said. "We want you to return and hang around for a few days, see if she approaches you again."

Now I got up, but since he was blocking the only moving-around space there was, I sat down again. "You've got to be kidding," I said after a moment. "If she's there, pick her up, get an identification, be done with it." Then I remembered the little girl who had mooched ice cream, but the memory only made my temper flare. "You've been watching me? For God's sake, why?"

"Only since Monday," he said tiredly, not at all placating me, merely explaining. "Sunday, a local police officer thought he saw the child. We had an APB out, naturally. Anyway, he thought maybe it was her, but she told him she was waiting for her daddy, and she ran to you and you bought her an ice cream. He forgot the whole thing. The next morning, he saw the two of you again, on a seawall or something, and felt that he had been right to put it out of mind. Then he saw you driving off alone — seems you have a noticeable car — and for the first time, he got suspicious enough to do a follow-up. We checked the license number and came up with you. For all we knew you had the kid stashed away back with your gear, so. . . ."

I stared at him. "I don't get it, Kersh. You know where that kid is, go get her. But the kid I saw isn't the one you're looking for. She's too old, four, or close to it. You're looking for what, a two-year-old?"

Kersh scowled more fiercely than ever. "I've got a tape recorder out in the car. I'd like you to make a statement, how you came to see the child,

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what she was wearing, what she said. Will you do that?"

"Sure," I said. "But, Kersh, she's the wrong child."

He started for the door. "Then you'll be out of it, won't you? Right back."

It was after ten and I was tired and sleepy. I had been in bed by ten every night and up before six every morning since my trek started. I yawned, but the Milliken story intruded and I remembered more of it now. Soap-opera stuff. Daddy had been a brute. Poor little rich girl married someone unsuitable, a tennis player, jockey, grounds keeper, someone like that. It didn't matter much who he had been, he had not lived long enough to see his child born. A fatal accident of some sort. I couldn't remember the details. Then, when her baby was a few weeks old, the Milliken daughter vanished with the child, and no one had seen them since as far as I knew. And that meant the child was only about two now. The reward must have climbed up to a million, I remembered, and tried to shrink the kid I had seen down to the right size. I couldn't; the wrong kid. I yawned again.

Kersh returned with a space-age tape recorder, all silver and black. "What we'd like, Mr. Seton, is for you to begin by stating your name and the date, to the best of your recollection, that you saw that little girl, and then just tell about it in your own words."

"You know the date better than I do."

"Probably, but we want it for the record. Ready?"

It didn't take very long; there was little to tell, after all. When I finished, Kersh asked, "Mr. Seton, will you help us find that child again?"

"No," I said firmly. "I'm on vacation. I don't know any way I could be of help."

"She trusted you," he said. "She came to you a second time without fear. We think she might approach you again."

I simply stared at him in disbelief.

Kersh sat there for a moment, then he said thoughtfully, "I wonder what you want, Mr. Seton."

"Aren't you going to turn that off?"

He did something to the tape recorder, possibly even turned it off, but I wasn't particularly interested. I watched him.

"We know that everyone wants something," he went on, still meditative. "We want your help, of course. But what do you want? Could we appeal to your sense of chivalry? Your sense of justice? An annual income, tax-free? Business thrown your way?"

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"I want you to get your butt out of here so I can go to bed." When he didn't move, I stood up, put my glass down on the bedside table, and started to unbutton my shirt. "Listen to me, Kersh. That kid I saw is not, repeat not, the Milliken girl. She's too old. She showed no sign of being a kidnappee. I've told you all I can about her, and I don't want to be involved in any scheme you're working. Now, I'm going to bed, and you can sit there all night for all I care."

He stood up, smiling slightly. The smile took ten years off his apparent age; he could have been a teacher in a junior college, pleased with his students, pleased with life.

He went to the door and then said, "I wonder why, when you finally caught up with Steve Falco and your wife, you didn't beat the shit out of him. When I know the answer to that I'll know how to get your cooperation, Mr. Seton. Good night."

WHEN I knew the answer to that, I thought, I'd know the answer to the riddle of the universe. I poured another drink and sat in the chair Kersh had vacated. It was very warm. Twelve years ago my grandfather died and left me a small fortune and his house in Atlanta. I moved to New York, married a model, Susan Lorenza, started a photography, graphic-arts business with Steve Falco, and bought the Thunderbird. Batting average way down, three strikeouts, one home run. Three years later, Susan and Steve had cleaned me out, and headed west. I still had the house in Atlanta — they hadn't known that it was a very fine house — and I still had the Thunderbird. I got drunk and stayed drunk for a long time, two years' worth of drunk, and then I went looking for them, and finally found them in Los Angeles.

Susan was still beautiful, but with a Hollywood gloss that was new, and breasts that were also new. She was wearing a yellow sweater that showed them off admirably. "I had to do it," she said. "I had to try to make it on my own." Her voice was new, also: voice-lessons new; she had learned how to put a little throb in it. The detective I had hired had reported that she was doing porn movies; I hadn't believed him. Now I did. Steve Falco was exactly the same, shorter than me by several inches, black hair, dark restless eyes. He snapped his fingers a lot, I remembered, and he was snapping them that day. "We'll make it up to you, kid," he said. "We always said we'd make it up to you, soon as we got the breaks." They were in a

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shabby little stucco house with plastic furniture. I took a step toward them, huddled together by the sofa, and Susan screamed, "Don't hit him! Winnie, please. Let me explain." Steve had cut in, "Star quality, that's what she has, wasted. I'll turn her into the biggest —"

For two years I had lived with a pit inside me that was filled with red-hot coals, and suddenly that day, looking at Susan's new breasts, I felt as if the pit had sealed itself off, the coals were gone, and there was only a hollow place there. I turned and walked out, patted the T-bird, got in it, and drove to Atlanta where I mortgaged the house and started Phoenix Publishing Company.

And I still didn't know why I hadn't beat the shit out of him. It had something to do with plastic furniture, I thought, pouring the last of the bourbon with regret. Plastic furniture, plastic breasts. That had something to do with it, but I couldn't sort it out more than that.

I remembered the day I called the Atlanta tenants and asked permission to inspect the house. I hadn't seen it for fifteen years. It had been beautifully maintained, with sparkling white woodwork, gleaming oak floors, and fine furniture. Camellias and azaleas were in bloom out front, and sunlight poured into the spacious rooms like a healing balm. I stood in the wide foyer reassuring the tenants that I had no plans to force them to move, and I was overwhelmed by shame.

When the tenants left two years later, I moved in.

I turned off the lights in my motel room and sat propped up in bed, not ready to sleep, but not willing to let Kersh know his visit was keeping me awake. He had tried to stir up the ashes, bring something to life that had died a long time ago, until now even the ashes were gone, no embers remained, only a hollow space, and all the poking and prodding he could manage would be as futile as shaking a stick in a vacuum. But he had tried. That was the salient point. He had tried. And I didn't know why.

He had tried to arouse what? My anger, frustration, my desire for revenge, retribution, the feeling of betrayal that had colored all the rest? Any of the above, all the above? Or simply my curiosity? I grimaced in the semidarkness. He had done that. I couldn't even guess how many work hours, how many dollars had gone into the background check they had done on me in just a few days. Why?

I eased myself down into the bed properly and stretched. If they were after the Milliken kid, I thought then, this was a false trail, and Kersh must

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know it. The child I had talked to was simply too old. I didn't know a lot about children, but two-year-olds were still infants, still in diapers mostly, still doing baby things, and the little girl I had bought ice cream for was well out of that. She was already a little person, not a baby. Not particularly pretty, or even cute that I could recall, but, in fact, I could recall little about her physically. Just a kid with brown eyes and blonde hair tangling in the ocean breeze.

But what if they were simply using the Milliken kidnapping as a cover to get to this other kid, I thought then, and came wide awake again. Slowly I shook my head. I didn't believe that. What could be bigger than Milliken's millions, his influential friends, the power he wielded?

I checked out of the motel early, and when I pulled into the parking lot of a restaurant half a mile away, the black Ford pulled in beside me.

"That's a sweetheart of a car," Kersh said admiringly. He trailed his hand over the silver hood. The car was dirty, but class showed, dirt and all.

"Who's your supervisor, Kersh?" I asked, walking toward the entrance of the restaurant. He told me and I went to a pay phone near the door and dialed information, then the FBI number in Washington, and when I got through to them, I asked for his supervisor. When I entered the restaurant itself a few minutes later, Kersh waved me to a booth. There was a pot of coffee on the table, service for two. Only a few other people were eating at this early hour.

"We hoped you'd think of checking," he said. "Thought you might, but if you hadn't I was going to suggest it. I'm having pancakes with blackberry jam. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?"

I poured coffee, seething. Assistant to the Director Leland Murchison had been expecting my call, he hoped I would cooperate, of the utmost importance, debt of gratitude, national interest. . . . He had had a list of buzzwords at hand and used them all. And told me absolutely nothing.

The waitress came to take our orders and when she had left again, I said, "Now what, Mr. Kersh? You tried reason, and hinted of bribery. Today do we advance to threats? IRS audits, red tape of one sort or another?"

He laughed. It was disconcerting to see. Scowling, or even simply neutral he was like an actor trying to portray the stern FBI agent, but smiling he could be the guy next door, the good buddy with a six-pack and a brand-new joke.

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"No, Mr. Seton," he said then. "Audits take too long, for one thing. And we want your help now. Today. What we decided to do is tell you the whole story."

Now I laughed.

His expression became rueful. He opened the briefcase on the seat beside him and brought out a sheaf of papers clipped together. "You know how I asked you to start your statement, name and date when you saw the kid. We've done them all the same way. These are preliminary statements, like yours; the questions and answers get a bit bulky, I'm afraid. This should be enough for now." He slid the papers across the table. "Just read through them," he said, and poured more coffee for both of us.

I nudged the papers to the side and he looked at me with a glint in his eyes that I hadn't seen before.

"Read them," he said softly, "or I'll ram my little black Ford into that big silver baby of yours."

I started to read the papers:

Ruth Hazeltine, February 16.

I've been a pediatrics nurse for fourteen years, always the swing shift. I like it, and now I'm so used to it, it just feels natural. It gave me the chance to be with my own kids in the evenings, when they needed me most, and I could sleep in the mornings when they were at school. It worked out fine. I was on that night. It was during that bad snowstorm and we were shorthanded. Gloria Strumm got snowed in, and couldn't make it, but it was a quiet night and Vanessa and I were managing O.K. There were nine babies, not counting the preemies, who are in a separate wing so we didn't have to deal with them. It used to be that once you got the moms tucked in for the night, that was it, but we went to feeding on demand ten years ago, and sometimes one of the babies is in with his mom two, three times a night. The Hilyard baby was one of them. While they're in with their moms we straighten up the cribs, change the sheets if they need it, just tidy up a bit, and I had done that to his crib, and had it all ready for him. I wasn't gone more than three minutes. Walked down the hall to Hilyard's room, collected the baby, said a word or two to the mother, and went back, and *she*, this little baby girl, was in his crib. No diaper, no bracelet, nothing, and sound asleep. I put the Hilyard baby down in a different crib and examined the girl baby; not a mark on her, good professional job with the cord, nice and warm. Born

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within the past three hours was how she looked to me. Around seven pounds, just a normal little baby girl. I covered her up and went out to get Vanessa. We called Dr. Weybridge, and he called Security. I didn't see anyone bring the baby in, didn't see anyone come on the floor after midnight. Just me and Vanessa.

Silently I went on to the next statement:

Vanessa Goldstein, February 16.

Nobody passed the nurses' station! I swear it. No one was up there but Ruth and me. Dr. Weybridge examined the baby and said for us to follow the standard routine, and we did. I put the drops in her eyes and the lab sent up Sandra Lewis to draw blood. We printed her and got a diaper and gown on her. I put the Baby Doe bracelet on her, started her chart. She was eight pounds, one-half ounce, twenty inches long. Normal reflexes.

I glanced at Kersh in annoyance, but he seemed fascinated by swirls in his coffee cup or something. I picked up the next paper:

Jane Torrance, M.D., February 17.

Dr. Weybridge simply made a mistake, that's all. And the nurses were overworked and shorthanded, as they said. I examined Baby Doe at 8:30 in the morning and found an infant who was at least ten days old. She was alert and active, her eyes were tracking well. Her cord had dropped off and the navel was healed.

Feeling exasperated, put upon, ignored by Kersh who was still absorbed by the contents of his coffee cup, I continued to read:

Lilian Tully, March 12.

I took her in. There was all that publicity, people lining up wanting to adopt her, you know. But you can't just farm off a kid like a sack of potatoes or something. There's channels. I run a foster house for kids, specialty is newborns, and I was next on the list, so I got her. And lie! Boy, did they lie! I don't know what they're trying to pull, them social workers, but if that kid was a newborn, then so'm I. I mean she already had teeth. Anyways, there she was and at first I thought I'd just go with it, keep her, start her education. You gotta start them young learning about rules and proper procedures. I teach them, and when they go on their way, they know a thing or two about discipline and obedience. Start them young and they stay straight,

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believe you me. Little kids need schedules, they need routines, but that one! Contrary from the day I laid eyes on her. You don't have to spank them or hit them, there's other ways to get their attention, but when I started to pinch her ear a little, to make her stop bawling for food off schedule, she bit me. A real devil she was. Sitting up in her bed, watching me like a witch. I couldn't keep restraints on her for beans. Sometimes you have to do that, keep them still for a little bit. Not her. Oh, I called them and told them to come and get the little devil. Put her in a kennel or something. I didn't want nothing more to do with the likes of her. I told them to check their records. I specialize in newborns, I told them.

I turned to the first page and checked the date there, and the date that was on the statement I had just read. Kersh was watching me with a blank expression, as if he had fallen asleep with his eyes open.

Marilyn Schlecter, August 20.

I don't know what happened! We're trying to keep up with more than two hundred cases, and we don't have enough people, or facilities. We don't even have a proper working computer. It eats records, erases information, misfiles things. It just happened. Her records got mislaid, misfiled. I don't know what happened to them. I don't even know how many different caseworkers handled her, none of them comparing notes, and some of them even renamed her. She obviously was not a six-month-old baby; she was a toddler, eighteen months to two years old. She was taken out to temporary homes two or three times until we could place her, and those records are a mess, different names, ages. But our supervisor had left and people were trying to fill in. No one can blame them for what happened. If we had more people and some office help.... Somehow she got in our books as Mary Jo Goodman and she was sent to Winona Forbush under that name. I don't know how it happened. But when they tried to get an identification for this other little girl, she turned out to be Mary Jo. I called Forbush and explained that a mistake had been made and arranged to collect the child the following day, but when I went out to pick her up, the house was empty. That's all I know. I just know she isn't Mary Jo Goodman. I don't know where she is, or who she is. And yes, I'm crying. And I'll keep crying.

I was reading more slowly, bewilderment and anger in about equal amounts my reaction to the stuff in the statements.

* * *

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Max Godel, September, near the end of the month.

I'm sittin' there in Sylvie's trailer, you know, reading the want ads. Nothing for me. Never 's nothing, but what the hell, I look. And the phone rings and it's Marsha, for chrissake! I mean, Marsha! Man, when she took a walk she didn't leave me nothing but a tattoo, and she'd a got that if she'd had a scraper. And there she is, and she goes, is Sylvie at work? She deals blackjack, why'd she be home at ten? And I go, so what? And she goes, wait'll you see. This is the biggest, just the biggest. I just got in town. I'm coming over. And I go, no way, babe. But she's already gone, and pretty soon she's pounding on the door, and I open it and she goes, you look good, Max. Sylvie gone? And I go, get lost, bitch. But she goes, look, Max, what I found. Or what found me. And it's just a kid. No two ways about it, Marsha's a fast worker, but this, for chrissake! It's a kid up and walking, and Marsha was with me for a couple of years, up to last spring. I mean, not even Marsha can work that fast, but the kid is holding her hand like she's Mama, all right. Blonde, brown eyes. Not the towhead the papers showed, not the saucer eyes either. Just a little kid, two, three years old, I mean little. Marsha sort of shoves the kid inside and she whips the door right outta my hand and slams it and stands pushing it with her back, like the army's out there and going to bust in any minute. Play with the cards, kid, she goes, and the kid goes to the table where I been playing solitaire. Before I read the want ads, I mean. And she starts to mess around with the cards, and Marsha goes, I need to hang out a coupla days, Max, and I go, Ha! Ha! And she goes, it's the biggest thing we ever got us in, Max. Look at her, and I look at the kid and I think, yeah, could be. The papers always get things wrong. And I look at Marsha and I go, you snatched *her*? You did that? And she goes, no way, Max. I was going back to the city — she thinks New York is the only city in the world — from Philly and I heard it on the radio, you know, the crash and all, and I was almost on top where it happened and I thought, what the hell I'd have a look, but there's all them cops and God knows who else stopping everything that moves, and I go, shit, it's not worth the pain. Know what I mean? And I'm in this line of cars, all trying to get the hell out of there, turning around, backing up, like it's crazy. So I turn off to a blacktop road, me and a zillion others, we all turn off, but I stop at this roadhouse for a beer and the place is full of talk about the crash and the kid that's been snatched, and I get an earful and split. All's I can think of is *de*part, get the fuck out of there, back to the city where you know what's what, and I'm driving, looking for a way back to a highway for God's sake, and *she* sits up in the backseat and asks are we going to

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be home pretty soon? The kid's over there at the table messing around with the cards all this time. She's got them all separated in suits. Diamonds, spades, like that, and she's got the face cards lined up and she's working on the rest of them, putting them in order, ten down. I don't know, it makes me nervous. I mean, she's just a *little* kid. Anyways, she ain't dressed in pink pants with flowers on the sides, or a pink shirt, and I shake my head. No way, I go, it ain't her. But Marsha goes, she had to buy her something to wear, her stuff was too small. She opens up the bag she's got, and there's the clothes the radio and TV yammered about all day. We gotta talk, she goes and she puts the kid on the bed and closes the door, and pretty soon Sylvie comes back and her and Marsha are screaming and yelling at each other and then both of them screaming at me, and finally I go, we gotta call the cops, for chrissake! And they both scream and yell some more, and for chrissake it's three in the morning, and we decide to get some sleep. Marsha puts some covers and a pillow on the floor for the kid and she takes the sofa and me and Sylvie hit the hay. And next thing I know the screaming starts again and Sylvie goes, you son of a bitch what've ya done with the kid, and I go, you're crazy. You know that, you're plain crazy. But the kid's gone, all right. And Sylvie goes, this'll lose me my job, you creep. You know that? And she calls the cops.

BREAKFAST HAD been delivered while I was reading the last page. I finished reading and then carefully shuffled the papers into a neat little stack and fastened the paper clip back on them before I glanced at Kersh.

"I know. Craziness," he said, eating.

I started on my eggs. Not just crazy, I thought, not just that. Creepy. It was crazy and it was creepy. I didn't believe the implications of what I had read, and if Kersh did he was crazy, but he wasn't alone, he had backup, superiors, underlings, and some of them must have believed it, too, and that was the scariest part of all. "Two different children," I said after a few minutes of silent eating.

He shook his head. "I wish," he said gloomily. "The link is the woman Winona Forbush. We recovered her body from the plane crash, and her boyfriend's body. They found themselves with an unidentified kid and flashed on the Milliken kidnapping and thought they could make a killing." He groaned. "No pun intended."

"That's what I mean. The kid they had obviously was not born last

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February. The Social Services office screwed up the records royally. The woman admitted it. It's a screwup all the way."

He looked almost apologetic. "We lifted prints from the Forbush house and checked them against the Snowstorm Baby. That was the only child the Forbush woman had. It's her."

I remembered it then, the Snowstorm Baby was what the papers had dubbed her, the child who mysteriously appeared at the hospital last February.

"You must have found out how she got to the hospital, who left her there," I said, working at controlling my anger. I didn't know what he was trying to put over, why he was telling me all this, and it was too much to take in with scrambled eggs and toast first thing in the morning.

"Well," he said mildly, "we weren't involved in that. Reverse kidnapping? What would you call it? Anyway, the Philadelphia police didn't find anything, and we didn't start looking until after the Milliken case opened again. Then we backtracked, and we're still backtracking. One more statement you should see. Saved the best for last." He pulled another paper from the briefcase and held it. "We already have statements from everyone connected with the hospital — workers, the medical staff, visitors, patients — or they're still coming in. It's a lot, Seton. A lot. This one might interest you."

I didn't want to read another one. I didn't want to think about this any longer, but my hand took the paper, and my eyes began tracking the words.

> Rae Ann Davis, February 16.
>
> I'm a nurse's aide, in the premature-baby ward. I've worked there for twenty-four years. The night of the storm we had triplets delivered, poor little things, we knew they wouldn't make it, but you always act like they have a chance and do everything you can. And we had a drug preemie come in and he needed detox, and we were shorthanded, like everyone else that night. So we were all running. So I came back from my break and I went in the bathroom that visitors use because if I'd went in the nurses' lounge they'd have put me to work again and I needed a couple more minutes. So in the bathroom on the counter there was this little bundle, something wrapped in a little towel. I looked at it, and it was this preemie. Not even that yet. More like a fetus, like a miscarriage or abortion, still had the placenta. It wasn't just right, like the cord was too long for

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one thing. It wouldn't have lived even if she'd carried it to term. I could have cried. Some poor little girl probably scared to death by what happened to her, and now this. But it'd been cleaned up and wrapped up just like somebody thought it could have made it. And they left it in the right place, not the preemie ward, I don't mean, but a Catholic hospital where the nuns would christen the poor little thing. Anyways even if it was still warm, it was dead, that's what I thought, and I wrapped it up again in the towel and took it with me to the nurses' station and then one of the real preemies went into a convulsion, and the triplets weren't hooked up yet, and it was like I knew it would be. They had me running with the rest of them for the next hour or more, and I just forgot about the fetus in the towel. I left it on the counter at the station and forgot it, God help me. And when I seen it again I got scared because I didn't call the head nurse or the nuns or do anything for the poor little thing, and I just put the towel and everything in my bag. I thought that when I got off work I'd put it on the doorstep, like in books, and let somebody else find it, nowhere near the ward, but out by the door. At twelve when I left it was snowing too hard to go home, and a couple of others were down at the door talking about sleeping over, and I didn't have a chance to do anything with it, so I went back to the nurses' lounge and it was still in my bag. But I couldn't get any rest until I did something, and finally I went back to the visitors' rest room. I meant to put it back where I found it, only it was different, not so little, more like a real baby, but small. And there's no placenta, like I thought before. Bigger than most of the preemies we get, though. I freaked out and I ran out of there, took the elevator to the canteen and had me a cup of coffee and a smoke. I thought I was going crazy, seeing things wrong, seeing things that maybe wasn't even there. Anyway I went back and it was still there, a baby girl, pink, warm, big enough for the baby ward, and I knew I'd been working with preemies too long, seeing them where they weren't even there. That's when I tied off the cord. I don't know why, just seemed like somebody should. I knew that if I waited a little bit Ruth would go get the baby I seen her take to the mother, and I could slip this one in one of the cribs and let them take care of it. I couldn't say I found it, not now. I mean nobody but me had been in the bathroom since nine. They'd ask me why I didn't find it before. And that's what I did. They didn't see me and the baby finally got a bed, and it all worked out all right, only I had to take some time off because I kept getting a headache from worrying about seeing things again. After I settled down a little I remembered the macaroni salad I ate that night in the cafeteria and I knew what I'd had was food

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poisoning, made me see things. Never seen anything I shouldn't since then."

Kersh was watching me narrowly when I finished the papers.

"Jesus bloody Christ!" I muttered. "You buy that a kid born prematurely last February is the equivalent of a four-year-old now? You choose to believe that instead of a mess of fucked-up records and two different kids?"

"By the time she left the hospital at least seven nurses and four doctors had examined her, each one giving a slightly different report. Then a dozen social workers, five foster parents had her, had somebody. Not exactly inexperienced observers," he said softly. "To say nothing of Max and crew, and then there's your statement."

The restaurant had filled up by then, and the noise level kept rising. Kersh glanced around, leaned forward, and said in a voice so low I could hardly hear it, "We had a psychologist go over your statement last night. She says you noticed a difference in the child from one day to the next, even if you weren't aware of it at the time. Day One you treated her like a three-year-old, the where's-Mommy routine. Few people know what to say to a child that young. You bought her the ice cream and she skipped away. Day Two, you actually talked to her, warned her about strange men. The way you'd talk to a four-year-old."

He picked up the bill. "My treat," he said reaching for his wallet.

His tame psychologist was right, I realized. But she didn't know the reason. When I lifted the child up to the seawall, I had been surprised by how much heavier she was than I had expected. That's what made me warn her. I shook my head hard.

"You wanted to know why we asked you to help," Kersh said, getting to his feet. "Because we might not recognize her; you might not either, but she might recognize you and trust you again. Let's take a walk."

We went outside and stopped at the Thunderbird. He ran his hand over the hood as he had done before. "I don't suppose you let anyone else take it out for a spin?"

"You suppose right."

"You need to think," he said. "You're the kind of man who drives and thinks, but head south, will you? Plenty of trees on the way. Like the man said, see one, you've seen them all."

"And you'll be right behind me, I suppose."

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"Or someone else," he said, smiling. "We'll talk again later." I unlocked the door and opened it. His hand held it open for another moment. "Seton, think fast, will you? Milliken has hired a herd of private investigators, and we don't want them to find the child first. We really don't want Milliken to take her."

"Life as a princess? Isn't that what he has to offer?"

"For how long? What do you suppose he'd do when he realized she isn't exactly what he ordered up? In all likelihood he had his son-in-law killed. No proof, no accusation even, but his daughter believed it and ran. We don't want him to have this child, Seton."

"And what will you do with her?" I asked bitterly.

His eyes took on that peculiar steely glint again. "Not my department," he said. "But it would be better than what he has to offer." He closed the door, patted the top, and then walked away to his black Ford. When I pulled out of the parking lot, he was behind me.

I drove to the Delaware Water Gap where I had planned to spend the day hiking. After only an hour on the trail, I returned to my car and stood looking at the scenery. The trees were turning nicely, but they had not yet acquired the full blaze I had anticipated. They would be better on my way back, I thought, and wondered how many times I had thought the same thing already.

Another car was parked at the lookout, a white Dodge, with a lean-faced man at the wheel reading a newspaper. I ignored him, just as he ignored me.

They couldn't make me do anything, I was thinking. They couldn't force me at gunpoint to walk on the beach until a little girl begged for an ice cream. No way to win the confidence of a child, parading a man at gunpoint. And why such a cock-and-bull story? Who was the kid? I could think of half a dozen answers that were more convincing than the story Kersh had told: the president's long-lost granddaughter, heir to the British throne, an oil billionaire's illegitimate daughter, an experimental subject carrying deadly viruses in her blood. . . .

A wind had come up, whipping through the gorge below, setting the trees adance, and twirling the leaves that looked like clouds of confetti. I had become hot and sweaty hiking, but now I began to shiver. Where was the kid sleeping? Was she staying warm and dry? Who was feeding her? Buying her clothes?

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I drove aimlessly through the mountains. Presently I would stop and take some pictures, I told myself, but I drove on and on. And finally I started to drive south. I didn't know yet if I would let myself be used by Kersh; I still didn't want to get involved in whatever was going on, but I drove south. I didn't believe his story, and now accepted that I probably never would know what they were up to, but they were putting in a lot of time on it, and they really did want my help. I laughed out loud when it occurred to me that his tame psychologist might have told him that arousing my curiosity was the key to use.

But mostly I was remembering how the little girl had reached out her hands for me to lift her to the wall, and how she had assumed I would help her down again, and how she giggled when I warned her about trusting strange men. Where was she now?

It was about two when I stopped at a restaurant. Kersh ambled over to my side as I was tossing my hiking boots into the trunk.

"Buy you some lunch," he said amiably. "Your appestat is sure set for different hours than mine. I thought I'd starve before you stopped."

I shrugged, and closed the trunk lid.

"Think of it as a refund on your income tax," he said, as we entered the restaurant together.

Regular business lunch, I thought, after we had ordered, pastrami on rye, milk for me, ham and cheese on white toast, coffee for him. No business talk yet. He looked as if he needed the coffee. He looked exhausted, and as if in confirmation, he yawned widely.

He didn't bring up the matter until we finished eating and I ordered coffee. Then he said, "You decided to go along with us?"

"I haven't decided."

"You've got nothing to lose, Seton. Just gain, all the way."

"What gain?"

"Goodwill. Bundles of goodwill, and that's not to be sneezed at these days. Get the government agencies on your side, clear sailing all the way."

"She might not even be there any longer."

"Oh, she hasn't left. We know who goes in and who comes out. Atlantic City's easy, not too many ways in and out, unless you want to take a long cold swim."

"The weather's changed; she probably wouldn't be on the beach now anyway."

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"We thought of that. Thing is, she probably hangs out where other kids are. Purloined-letter effect. We have a pretty neat city map for you. It'll be in your room. Anyway, you wander around taking pictures of the elementary schools, the playgrounds, the beach, the boardwalk. Where there are other kids, she'll turn up. We're betting on it."

He finished his second cup of coffee and motioned to the waitress for a refill. Any minute now he'd start twitching, I thought. Very quietly he said, "Seton, someone's going to find that child. You know it, and I know it." Reluctantly I nodded. "Good. Now, we'll make your reservation for you. You like that place you stayed in before? The Abbey? If not, say so. We'll put you up at the Taj Mahal, Trump's Palace, whatever you say. Meals, booze, whatever you want, just put it on the tab. No problem. If there are other expenses, keep an account and hand it in. We'll take care of it."

The Abbey was relatively small, three or four blocks off the main drag, quiet. I said it would do fine.

"O.K. See, we want you to be comfortable. This might take a few days. She might not spot you right off, or she might hold back a day or two. If she does approach you, talk with her. That's all, just normal friendly chatter. Then leave, and you're done. From sundown to sunup you're on your own. Play, have fun. She isn't going to show at night. In a place like Atlantic City a kid by herself at night would stick out like a dinosaur on the beach. Look over the map; we'll mark the places we think she might frequent. If she doesn't show in any of them, then wander about where you think she might turn up. We don't expect you to search for her, just be in places where she might see you."

I drank my coffee; it had grown cold and was bitter. "What if she doesn't approach me in a few days?"

"Then we think of something else to try," he said tiredly. "On Saturday we'll turn the screws a little. There's going to be one of those unfortunate leaks in time for the news Saturday night, and Sunday's papers. It will hint that the FBI suspects the Milliken grandchild is being hidden in Atlantic City, and that they intend a house-to-house search." He sighed and spread his hands. "We want to avoid doing that. Let's hope she comes to you tomorrow or by Saturday afternoon."

I had an image of a small child being cornered by a flock of FBI agents, a SWAT team, a herd of private investigators, and a million poor sods who knew about the Milliken reward. I stood up. "Jesus," I said. "She's just a

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little kid!"

"Is she, Seton? Are you sure?"

I started to walk away and he suddenly snorted with laughter. "Good Lord, I just realized why you like the Abbey. They let you park your own car there, don't they? No valet parking."

I kept moving. He caught up with me at the door. "If Falco had taken your car instead of your wife, then would you have beaten the shit out of him?"

He was still laughing, and I was still walking away from him, or he would have known that at that instant my indecision had become resolved.

If the child approached me, and if she was the three-to-four-year-old I had seen before, I'd do what Kersh wanted. Turn her over. You can't leave a small child alone in Atlantic City, or anywhere else. She belonged to someone; presumably Kersh knew who that was, and presumably she would be returned and I would never know more about it than I did then. But if a child approached me who seemed older, bigger, different in any significant way, Kersh couldn't have her.

Stating this to myself was simple and at the time it even seemed reasonable; following up seemed impossible. I drove and thought and the more I thought the more hopeless it appeared. They had the city sewed up; no one could leave except by boat without crossing a bridge, and it was easy enough to maintain surveillance on a bridge.

Traffic was heavy; I got in the right lane and let everything moving pass me by, and finally came up with the name Joey Marcos, and a plan that might even work. I pulled off at the next gas station/diner complex and called Joey in Manhattan. Since he worked for one of the biggest ad agencies in the business where he had advanced to dizzying heights, it was easier to get the firm's number from information than to get him at the agency. Finally he came on the line.

"Win," he said, "that really you?" I got in a word and then he said, "Hey, man! How you doing? Where are you? Come on over!"

"Joey, shut up and listen. I need a favor."

"You got it," he said, dead serious.

He didn't interrupt a single time when I told him I needed someone to bring me a car and to fly home again without seeing me.

"I'll need the license number, and make, all that," I said. "And the keys,

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natch. If this happens can you be available over the next three nights? I don't know when or even if I'll need the car."

"Baby," he said soberly, "this sure sounds like big trouble to me. Atlantic City? No problem. You'll want a couple of numbers where you can reach me."

I let out the breath I hadn't know I was holding. "Thanks Joey," I said. "Just thanks." No questions, no demands, just, *You got it*. We talked a few more minutes and when I hung up I felt committed for the first time.

When Joey was thirteen and I was fourteen his family moved from Brooklyn to Atlanta, where they did not find the overtouted Southern hospitality. Joey was no darker than I was, but the kids in high school knew he was black, and he had a funny accent, Spanish Puerto Rican overlaid with Brooklyn. We had a couple of classes together and for the first time I found someone I could talk art with, and he said it was the same for him. He was shy when he wasn't being a strutting macho son of a bitch. We both wanted to be artists; we talked about what we would do: go to the Rhode Island School of Design — neither of us did — spend a year or two soaking up art in Italy — he did, I didn't. When he was fifteen and I was sixteen he was picked up for questioning about a break-in at a 7-Eleven, and I signed an affidavit saying he had been with me at my folks' cabin at the lake that weekend. It was a lie. There was a lot of sniggering, a lot of *those* looks, but in the end they turned him loose. I invited him out to the cabin the next weekend and I beat him up out there. It wasn't hard; I had several inches and fifteen pounds on him.

"What'd you do that for?" he wailed, holding a bloody washcloth to his cheek.

"Because you're a thickheaded *nigger* and I know what they'd do to you."

This time he started the fight, and afterward we both cried.

Back in the Thunderbird, driving south, the plan shaped up more and more firmly. But there was nothing at all I could do about it until I saw the child again.

I CHECKED INTO the Abbey, showered, changed clothes, and hit the casinos. I played blackjack a little, played with the slots a little, and hit the money machines a lot, three hundred here, five hundred there until I had nearly five thousand in cash. I had dinner late, and then drove up and down the island, in and out of the side streets, along the

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Boardwalk, back until I finally found the kind of place I was looking for. A round-the-clock storefront bingo game with a hundred players, and a tiny children's area off to one side. Out front there were two zebras under spotlights, and next door was a church. Atlantic City. I found two parking lots within two blocks and, satisfied, I went back to the hotel and went to bed.

In the morning after breakfast I called Joey from a pay phone and told him the addresses of the parking lots, and he told me the kind of car he would drive down if I gave the word. An '89 Toyota Celica, gray. I made a note of the license number; he said he'd be standing by, and that was that. Then I went out to the Boardwalk and the beach with my gear.

By three in the afternoon I was ready to start driving anywhere. The weather was cold and gray, threatening rain that didn't materialize, but hung there like a glower. I had taken more pictures than I had film for, and was shooting with an empty camera, which didn't help my disposition. And I had eaten a hot dog for lunch and now had heartburn. Not a good day, I was thinking, when I saw a bunch of kids playing on some concrete turtles. Little boys were climbing over the things, kicking at each other, king-of-the-turtle fashion. And behind them a small group of little girls played with a ball. And she was there.

The sweater I had seen her in before had been a bit too big; today it was just a little too small. A hot wash, I told myself, getting out the camera, setting up, keeping my eyes on the boys and the turtles. All the kids stopped to watch me. Don't come near me, I thought to her. Keep your distance, kid. She stayed back with the other girls. Today she was mingling with four- to five-year-olds and passing just fine. I focused on the boys who began to make faces; the girls made faces back at them, taunting them, and I said in a conversational tone, "Your turn next, girls. Let's do the boys first. You know where the zebras are, down by the church?" One of the boys said sure, and I went on, leaning over the camera now, "Well, tonight I'll be taking pictures there. After dark."

The little girls began to move in closer, and I said, still addressing the camera, "Keep back. People are watching us, you know." I glanced up at the kids, who laughed. Belatedly she laughed, too. But she looked frightened. One of the boys was trying to stand on his head; he fell, and they all laughed louder. I pretended to take his picture anyway. One of the girls threw the ball then and they all ran off after it; none of them looked back at me. The

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I thought I glimpsed the man behind the nearly babyish face. That man was frightened.

boys stopped horsing around and I packed up my gear. "Thanks, fellows," I called, and walked on.

Had it been enough? I had no way of knowing. But, at the very least, no watcher would have had cause to single her out. And for the first time I felt a shiver that was not brought on by weather. I thought of Kersh's words when I protested that she was just a little kid: "Are you sure?" And I knew that I wasn't sure of anything.

I wandered for ten minutes, spotted a coffee shop, and went in. From a pay phone there I called Joey and said, "Tonight," and hung up, then quickly dialed my own office number. Gracie answered and we chatted a minute or two. A tall black woman had moved close enough to overhear and I made no attempt to keep her from hearing. After that I had coffee and a danish.

Kersh was waiting in the lobby when I got back to the Abbey. "Buy you a drink," he said.

Since for the past half hour all I had thought of was getting inside, getting warm, and having a drink, I shrugged and followed him into the hotel bar. "You look like hell," I said when he sat opposite me at a tiny table. The light was dim, and seemed to exaggerate the shadows under his eyes and the pallor that had overcome the pinkness of his cheeks.

"Cold coming on," he said. "I feel lousy. Too damn damp here."

"Tell me about it," I muttered. We ordered and didn't talk until we had our drinks in hand.

"No dice yet," he said finally. "We really didn't expect it would be quite that easy, you understand."

"I worked my butt off in the cold today."

He grinned fleetingly. "I know. One of the reports stresses how conscientious you were. Well, tomorrow's another day."

"Why don't you get some sleep," I said, draining my glass. "I'm cold, hungry, and tired. I intend to take a very hot shower for a long time, then eat a good dinner, and then go to bed. I recommend it."

"Maybe it'll end tomorrow," he said philosophically. "Maybe she'll come up and ask, not for ice cream, not in this weather. Maybe hot chocolate. Hot chocolate today, Coke tomorrow, martini the next day?"

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He nodded, and looked past me, and for a brief moment, I thought I glimpsed the man behind the nearly babyish face. That man was frightened.

At 9:30 I returned to the hotel after dinner, retrieved my key from the desk and was given an envelope that had been left for me. The car key for the Toyota. At a quarter to ten I turned off the room lights and left again, this time heading for the back stairs, not the elevator. I had put on a heavy sweater under my jacket, and my pockets were stuffed with money. I took nothing else with me. If anyone stopped me I didn't want a razor to give me away.

I went out by the side door to the parking lot. Many people were around; it was Friday night, a long fun weekend shaping up. I walked around the building, out to the back street, and started the longer walk to the bingo room and the zebras.

I walked fast, trying to keep warm; a stiff cold wind was blowing in off the ocean. When I reached the street with the perpetual bingo game I slowed down and even paused a moment to glance inside the storefront. It looked like the same bunch of people, only more of them, and the same bunch of bored kids in the little playroom. I moved on past the two zebras, drew even with the entrance to the church, then, as I was getting closer to the corner, a small figure came out from behind a message board. She slipped her hand into mine.

She was icy, shivering hard, still in the sweater that was too small and too lightweight for the weather. Silently we kept walking, her hand in mine. Two blocks, I was thinking. Just two blocks to the parking lot, a car, a heater, maybe even safety for her. We covered one of them, still not speaking, not walking fast enough to draw attention. There were a lot of people on the sidewalk, in groups, in pairs, bunches of teenagers. . . . I was afraid a few people were eyeing me reproachfully, eyeing the child. Traffic had jammed to nearly a gridlock; drivers were leaning on horns, music blared. Another block. I resisted the impulse to pick her up and run.

We found the car and she got in the backseat. On the front seat in an envelope were the parking ticket, Joey's driver's license and even a credit card, and under the envelope was Joey's beautiful black glove-leather beret that he had bought in Paris fifteen years ago. It had become almost a trademark with him. I put it on.

I drove the side streets for a few minutes before I stopped. "Are you

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O.K.?" I asked the child. "Warm yet?"

She nodded. "I'm hungry, though," she said.

"I'll find something for you to eat as soon as I can." I looked up and down the street, a little traffic, no one on foot, and I got out to inspect what Joey had provided. I had asked for a dark blanket, but he had done much better than that. The car was gray with black sheepskin seat covers, black floor rugs, and the blanket was so dark it looked black. There were two sleeping bags, a six-pack, a Styrofoam cooler, a thermos bottle and a pillow. In the cooler were sandwiches, apples, a wedge of cheese, a tin of smoked oysters. I wanted to laugh and to cry.

"Listen," I said to the child, handing her a sandwich, "we'll drive around for a while and then we'll leave the island. After you eat, you have to stay on the floor with the blanket over you, until I say you can come out. O.K.?"

"O.K." She bit into the sandwich ravenously.

I got one of the sleeping bags from the trunk and spread it on the rear floor, and as soon as she was through with the sandwich I arranged her with the black blanket over her. It was as if she had become invisible, the effect was so good. I nodded at her. "What's your name?"

She shook her head. "I don't know."

"What do the children call you?"

"Nothing. They don't like me."

"O.K. We'll think of a name for you." She would fall asleep, I thought, and I would have to remember to check on her to make certain she hadn't worked her way out from under the cover, but as long as she stayed where she was, it would take a very close look to spot her.

I got behind the wheel again and put Joey's driver's license and his credit card in my wallet and removed everything that had my name. I owe you, Joey, I thought, when I started to drive again. I wouldn't try to leave the island until the traffic jam was gone; I didn't want to be in a stopped car under the garish lights of the streets leading to the causeway. Instead, I drove the length of the island, poking along, and when I got back it was a little past midnight and the gridlock had vanished. There was still heavy traffic, but manageable now, and I got in it after glancing at the child to make sure she was hidden. She was sound asleep, out of sight.

They stopped me, glanced inside the car, looked in the trunk, called me Mr. Marcos after looking at the driver's license, and then waved me on. I didn't relax until I reached the first tollbooth and was stopped a second

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time and waved through. I turned west, heading for Wilmington and points west and south. No one looked inside the car again, or asked for I.D. Along about three in the morning, when I was afraid of falling asleep at the wheel I pulled off the road into a driveway, and opened the thermos. Steaming-hot black coffee. I laughed when I sipped it. Joey had spiked it liberally with bourbon.

I slept for nearly three hours, woke up freezing and stiff, and finished the coffee. The child was sleeping sweetly, nice and warm under the blanket. I had wanted to be through Frederick, heading south on 340 by morning, but it looked as if I couldn't make it. I had stayed off the freeways, the interstates, the toll roads, and the roads I had chosen instead had slowed me down. I began to drive again. In a short while she yawned and said she had to go to the bathroom, and she was hungry and thirsty. We stopped at the side of the road and I told her to go into the bushes. She balked, but finally she did, and then we ate the last of the sandwiches, and she started on an apple. I looked at her in dismay. She needed her face washed, her hair combed, clean clothes. . . .

"Why were you hiding?" I asked her then.

"I don't know," she said with her mouth full.

Fair enough, I thought tiredly. If she asked me why I was hiding her, that would be my answer. "Do you know who is looking for you?"

She shook her head. "Do I have to stay on the floor again?"

I knew it would not be as effective during daylight hours. "No. But stay in the backseat. You know that people are looking for you, don't you?" She nodded solemnly. "O.K., if we have to stop, get down there again. We'll be getting to a town pretty soon, and when stores open, I'll get you some other clothes and a hairbrush. And you'll have to wait in the car for me. O.K.?"

"O.K."

When I started to drive again, she sat on the edge of the backseat with her chin on the passenger seat. "Where did you sleep when you were hiding?" I asked.

"Places. In a car once. And I saw a dog go in a house and I went in after him. He had his own little door. He was my friend."

A dog door? I got as much from her as she could remember or wanted to tell me; it was hard to say which. She remembered there was a plane wreck, she said, and she saw a lot of people by cars talking and she opened a car

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door and got in. But she hadn't liked those people much; she had been afraid they would hurt her ears, and she left when they all went to sleep. Then she followed the dog into his house and ate cereal there. She went in another house but people came back and locked the doors and she hid in a closet all night and slept and when they went away the next day she crawled out a window.

"Why did you ask me to buy you ice cream?"

"I was hungry."

As she talked I was overcome by rage and outrage, but now I felt only great sadness, a stomach-wrenching sickness. I looked at her in the rearview mirror; she was watching the scenery intently. Everything was new to her, I realized; she was discovering her world, and her lessons had included the most basic lessons in survival. She had learned them well.

We were getting near Frederick; traffic was picking up, and there were malls finally. I shopped for her and made her change her clothes in the backseat, and then pulled into a gas station where she went into the rest room and washed up and brushed her hair. When she came back I told her to sit up front; it would look more suspicious to have her in back, I thought. Other parents didn't seem to do that. We stopped at a strip mall and I bought her a few more things, and a new worry presented itself. She looked too different from the other kids we saw; everything she had on except her shoes was brand-new. Shoes, I thought with dismay. She would need a bigger size.

And I needed to call her something, I also realized. "When we're around other people," I said in the car, "you should call me Daddy. Will you do that?"

"Don't you know your name, either?"

"I know it, but little kids don't use names for their parents. They call them Mommy and Daddy. And we need a name for me to call you. What name do you like?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"What did you call yourself if the other kids wanted to know your name?"

"They didn't. Once I said my name was Kid and a girl hit me and I ran away." She gave me a sidelong look, and asked, "Oprah? Can that be my name?"

"No. It's already taken. How about Sarah? Or Jennifer? Or Michelle?

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Rachel?"

She pursed her lips and said positively, "Today my name is Dolly."

The sick feeling returned. She didn't know any names. "Dolly," I said. "But just for today." Ahead, I saw a Goodwill outlet, and headed for it. Good, serviceable clothes, used clothes, worn clothes, kids' clothes. Maybe even shoes.

We did better in the Goodwill store than we had done before, and I even bought a few things for her "older sister." She looked at me hard for a second, started to speak, then looked past me. "Can I have a book?"

There was a used-book section that had a shelf of children's books. She passed over the simple ones, though, and began to page through a book that appeared to me to be for third- or fourth-grade kids. When had she had time to learn to read? She chose four books and we left. She was skipping at my side, smiling. I hadn't seen her smile very often; I liked it.

Driving again, I asked her who had taught her to read.

"I don't know."

"'Sesame Street' maybe," I suggested.

She brightened and said yes. She had seen 'Sesame Street,' and she went back to the book she was reading.

I bought ice for the cooler, added milk and juice and more fruit, and continued southward. Home free, I thought, not with any great elation, however. At first I had been completely preoccupied with the how, and had given no thought to what next. I had not really expected it to work, I had to admit. Her instincts had told her to hide, and mine had told me to help her. Now what? My instincts had deserted me. I could drive around with her for the next few days and then what? I couldn't take her home, obviously, and I couldn't stay on the road forever.

I glanced at her; she was sounding out a new word silently, pursing her lips, a slight frown wrinkling her forehead. She had asked me for help a few times with new words—doubtful, reluctant, wholesome, joyous.... What are you? I wanted to demand. Who are you? A sport, a mutant? Will the accelerated process of maturation continue? Is it an illness?

I understood why Kersh had been frightened. He had given me a clue when he said she would stand out like a dinosaur on the beach if she went out alone at night. A dinosaur on the beach. Not her, but maybe the rest of us? Were there others like her? Would she have children who would be born weighing a few ounces, and reach maturity in a couple of years? Too

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many questions, no answers. I knew I should stop at a phone and call Kersh, tell him to come get her, let the scientists have a go at the riddle. And I knew I wouldn't do that. I felt as if my instincts had forced me to jump off a cliff, and then had deserted me; below, the chasm yawned, and I was airborne.

She closed the book and sighed.

"No good?"

"It's dumb," she said.

"Next town with a mall we'll stop and go to a real bookstore and I'll pick out a few things for you." She flashed me a smile and opened another book. *Winnie the Pooh*, I thought, *The Wind in the Willows, Alice in Wonderland. . . .*

LATE IN the afternoon I made what I planned to be the last stop of the day before we hit a motel. Another mall, this one with a bookstore. I picked out the few books that I wanted her to have, and she was browsing when some teenage boys entered and began talking to a teenage girl behind the counter.

"Roadblocks, the state cops, Chiefie, and his crew, and a bunch more. Escaped convicts, that's what Clarence is saying, over at the Arco station."

"They stopped Brother McNirney and made him open the trunk of his car," another boy said, and they all laughed.

"Come on," I said to the kid. I took her hand and we walked to the counter to pay for the books. Her hand was shaking.

In the wide aisle of the mall I began to think about the car with stuff strewn about every which way. Paper bags from Goodwill with her clothes, department-store bags, my shaving stuff in a bag, things she had outgrown. . . . I veered toward a Sears where I bought a suitcase, and then I saw a line of kids and parents at one of those four-in-one theaters. A Disney film was showing.

"Listen," I said to her, "I'll take you to the movie and you stay there until it's over. When you come out, I'll be right here waiting. O.K.?"

Her hand tightened in mine and she looked at me for what seemed too long a time before she nodded.

"I'll come back," I said. "I promise."

Many parents were doing the same thing, I realized a few minutes later, as we got our kids settled down with popcorn, and ducked out. Most of the

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others hadn't bothered with the charade of buying two tickets.

I straightened up the car, packed the suitcase and put it in the trunk along with the blanket and sleeping bags; I put the six-pack of beer and some chips in a paper bag on the backseat, added the can of smoked oysters, and looked it all over. Satisfied that no one would suspect I was traveling with a child, I got in the line of traffic heading south, stopping and starting, stopping again. Finally I was at the head of a double line where the right lane became an access road to the interstate about three miles to the west, and the left lane was local traffic. I was in the left lane, and was not detained very long, but they asked me to open the trunk and they checked the registration Joey had left in the glove compartment.

It chilled me more than anything else had done. We were more than three hundred miles from Atlantic City, and they were checking cars. Maybe random checks, maybe they had been tipped, someone had become suspicious, maybe there were escaped convicts. I knew I had to get off the road, stop long enough to get some sleep, and think. I pulled in at a Best Western motel a few blocks farther down and registered for Mr. and Mrs. Marcos and two children; my wife and kids were watching the movie and I would collect them later, I said. The clerk was so bored he hardly even looked up.

I returned to the mall by side streets, keeping well back from the highway that bisected the town, and arrived at the theater a few minutes before the movie ended. Ten or fifteen other adults were also waiting for the children to emerge. I saw the child before she saw me; she was disconsolate and guarded at the same time. She looked like a little girl who had been abandoned. Then she spotted me and her face lighted up; she laughed and ran to me.

"Hi, honey," I said, swinging her up in my arms. She kissed my cheek.

That night I watched her sleeping. She could easily pass for five years old, I knew. No one would question the age if I said that. She was smart, maybe brilliant, but ignorant. There simply hadn't been time yet for her to learn about things like donkeys and owls. I had read *Winnie the Pooh* for a while; she had stopped me repeatedly to ask questions. She needed a library to read her way through, and schoolbooks, textbooks, math books, whatever other kids took for granted, no doubt many things I wasn't even aware of. Like names.

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My plan to drive around for a few days had to be scuttled. I had to get her somewhere and settle in, stay out of sight, off the roads, but where?

I finally lay down on the other bed and it came to me: Aunt Bett. Not a real aunt of mine, she had been my mother's best friend as far back as I could remember. They had grown up together, had gone to school together, married at about the same time, and visited back and forth almost daily until twenty years ago when Aunt Bett had moved to Tennessee where she still lived. After that they had paid visits to each other several times a year. When my father died almost instantly from a massive coronary, she had come and stayed for several weeks. A year later, when my mother drove into a tree doing ninety, Aunt Bett had wrapped her arms around me and said I shouldn't blame myself. At nineteen, I found that embarrassing, and until then it had not occurred to me to attach blame. I had not seen her again until four years ago when I had dropped in to see her on my way to a trade show in Cincinnati. We didn't correspond, or exchange Christmas cards, or phone calls. She was not listed in my address book. Aunt Bett. About seventy-five, maybe a little more, she lived in a house by herself in an area that had been taken over by developers, leaving only half a dozen of the original residents. Good old Aunt Bett, I said to myself; then I was able to go to sleep.

The last time I saw Aunt Bett the house had needed repairs which she said a hired man would do as soon as he could. The repairs had not been done, and I understood now, with a pang of guilt, that there was no hired man, probably not enough money to hire anyone, and the house was gradually falling apart. Aunt Bett was more frail than I had expected, close to eighty. She kept up the flower beds, and had a tiny weed-filled garden, but the rest of the two acres had gone to brambles and scrub pine and oak trees. Across the creek that made up one side and the back boundary was an upscale subdivision with a high wire fence.

Aunt Bett was delighted to see us, and started to bustle in an authoritative way. "Of course you'll stay awhile," she said. "And, Win, dear, will you see if the upstairs bedrooms are aired out? If you'd just let me know. . . ." Like that, we were invited to stay as long as we wanted.

I told her that Joe Marcos was the father, that his wife had had an accident and would be in traction for a few weeks, and they had been desperate for help with the child, who had told me that today she was Alice.

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Alice Marcos.

"I thought I would keep her for a week or two," I finished. The child had watched me silently as I gave her a father and mother and background in a New York City apartment.

"You're going to leave her alone in that big house of yours while you go off working every day? Win! That's no way to treat a little girl. Come on, Alice, you can help me make supper."

At breakfast the next morning the child announced that today her name was Mary. I held my breath, but Aunt Bett nodded. "All right, Mary. I like that name, always did. You want to help me wash up the dishes?" I let out the breath.

I made a list of the things that needed doing most — puttying windows, replacing two panes of glass, fixing the front porch rail.... It was a long list. I checked Aunt Bett's groceries and made another list, even longer. Aunt Bett had no idea how much food that little girl could stow away.

And Aunt Bett started the child on a new education. "She doesn't know a biscuit from a bread roll," she said indignantly. "She doesn't know a cosmos from a zinnia. What were they thinking of, bringing her up ignorant?"

In the afternoon, I was on the ladder finishing a window when I heard Aunt Bett naming flowers to her: Busy Lizzie, Sassy Francie, old-man's beard, honeysuckle.... They moved out of range. Later, from the roof, I saw the child darting here and there examining everything. She had on a red sweater and her hair was tied back with a red ribbon; she looked like a rare tropical butterfly in the golden sunlight, swooping down, darting away, alighting somewhere else.

She was going through the books in the house at an alarming rate. Aunt Bett's children had left stacks and boxes of books upstairs, and more were in the attic and basement. The child clearly intended to read them all. Whatever she read she remembered, whatever she heard she retained. Her education, haphazard as it was, advanced like lightning. And she was growing. I worked at fixing up the house and tried to think of what to do with her.

I mowed the lawn and reglazed some windows. I fixed the porch rail and took down the screen door and replaced the screening; I puttied and caulked and put up weather stripping, and I was no closer to a solution than I had been the day we arrived. I was beginning to feel desperate; I had to go home,

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go back to my own life, my office, my company.

We had been there for six days when a visitor dropped in, the first one all week. "Is Mrs. Markham here?" she asked. She was a prim-looking woman of about fifty whose clothes and car — a Buick — said money. She was eyeing me with unconcealed hostility.

"Aunt Bett? She's around back, I think."

"Oh, I thought you might be one of her sons."

I had been painting the new wood of the porch, and I stopped, waited for her to go, but she took a step or two toward me instead. "I'm Hadley Pruitt," she said. "I'm a volunteer worker for the county senior services. Frankly, Mr. —"

"Winston," I said.

"Mr. Winston, we are terribly concerned about your aunt living out here alone. I've written to her sons, both of them, but no one seems to be able to persuade her that she should give up the house, move into something more manageable. She should not be alone, Mr. Winston. Not at her age. And she can't afford a live-in companion."

"Where do you think she should go?" I could imagine Aunt Bett's reaction to any suggestion from this woman. And as for Bob and Tyler, they would both treat Hadley Pruitt with such gracious courtesy she would think she was being courted, but they would then defer to their mother.

"There are government housing developments," Hadley Pruitt said eagerly, smiling now, "especially designed for elderly people. She has a tiny pension, but they base the rent on what the tenants can afford. She could manage quite well."

"I'll tell her you said so, ma'am," I said very politely.

She stiffened. "Since she has company, I won't bother her today. Goodbye, Mr. Winston."

I watched her drive off, and returned to the paint job, but she had given me the first workable idea I'd had. I took the brushes and paint around back to clean up, and saw Aunt Bett on the porch in her old rocker, the sun on her legs, her eyes closed, and the child on the step nearby. I motioned to her, put my finger to my lips so we wouldn't wake up Aunt Bett.

"I'm not asleep," Aunt Bett said, sitting up straight. "I'm trying to figure out a riddle. What has eighteen legs and bats?"

The child was watching her with suppressed glee. She had found a joke book and was going right through it with Aunt Bett who was being a good

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sport.

"I give up," Aunt Bett said finally.

"A baseball team!" She laughed and Aunt Bett laughed along with her.

"What's your name today?" I asked the child.

"I already told you. Don't you remember?"

"Tell me again."

"Nope. You have to guess."

Aunt Bett winked at her and got up and went inside. I waited until the door closed behind her and then said, "If Aunt Bett wants to take care of you, do you want to stay with her for a while?"

"Are you going away?" she asked, instantly sober.

"I have to pretty soon. You know, I have work to do, people who expect me to be there. I can't stay away much longer, and I can't take you home with me. They'll be watching for you."

"It's Francie," she said, looking at her new shoes.

"Sassy Francie?" I asked, smiling.

She shook her head. "Just Francie."

I put my arm around her stiff little figure, and after a moment she buried her face against my shoulder and held on to me.

I stroked her hair. "I wish I could take you with me," I said softly.

"That's all right," she said, her words muffled.

I waited until she was in bed before I brought it up with Aunt Bett, who looked troubled. "What's wrong with her, Win? She isn't Joe Marco's child, is she? Is she yours?"

"No. I wish she were. She has a growth problem, hormones or something. No treatment. All she needs is a place where she can feel safe and wanted. You can imagine what it would be like for her to try to go to school, outgrow everyone in her class, be mocked and teased."

She nodded gravely. "Yes, I can imagine that. Whose child is she? Where does she belong?"

"I don't know for sure," I said after a moment. Then in a rush I told her, "She's a foundling, and researchers are after her to see what makes her tick. That's all I know about her." It was close enough to the whole truth.

"I've known you from the day you were born," she said. "Tell me the truth, Win. Have you done something wrong?"

I shook my head. "I've done something I probably shouldn't have done in hiding her, bringing her here. But nothing wrong."

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The troubled look did not yet leave her wrinkled face. "You know I'll be eighty in March? Eighty," she said in a musing way. "I don't expect I'll be around very much longer, Win. This wouldn't be a permanent home, is what I mean."

"I don't think she'll need a permanent home," I said slowly.

"Well, then, maybe it'll all come out even. Maybe it will. I'll take good care of her, dear."

We talked about money for the child's care, a touchy subject. If I suggested too much Aunt Bett would be insulted, feel that I was treating her as a charity case, but it had to be enough not to impoverish her further. The kid outgrew everything within weeks. And she ate like a horse. Then I had to make certain about communications; they had to be able to get me if necessary; I had to know how she was doing. Joey Marcos would be the go-between, I decided.

When it was done, Aunt Bett stood up to go to bed. At the doorway she glanced back at me and paused. "I know why I'm doing this, Win. I'm so lonely, and already I love the child, you see. She could be one of my own grandchildren. But why are you?"

"She needed help, I happened to be there."

Aunt Bett regarded me another moment, then went on to her room, clearly unconvinced.

Why? I echoed, alone in the living room. The world was full of kids who needed help; Atlanta was full of them. I gave to good causes, worthy charities, did my civic and moral duty through donations, and tried to put them all out of mind, and most of the time was quite successful at not thinking of the troubled world. Why? Because I had grown to love her? Maybe, but not the day I took her away in a borrowed car. I certainly had not loved her then, and was not sure I did now. I'd had very little experience in loving another person, after all. I was young enough to have half a dozen or more of my own children if this was a simple paternal urge. I could be married within a week, I knew, father a child within a year. I didn't need a surrogate daughter. Why?

The next day I took her shopping for the last time. We bought her a couple of things and then a lot of things she thought her big sisters would like. I bought a new television for them, and arranged for cable, paid six months in advance. I bought her a computer, several programs, and half a dozen computer books, and that evening gave her a few elementary lessons

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in computing; that went exactly like all her other lessons. She saw no difference in learning the names of flowers, learning the African tribes' names, learning computerese.

The following day I started to drive to New York. We did not delay over the good-byes. No one cried. But when I looked back through the rearview mirror and saw the ancient frail woman holding the hand of the child for whom age was meaningless, I wanted to cry. Oh, I wanted to cry.

IN NEW York I returned Joey's possessions and we had a long talk, and afterward Winston Seton reentered the world. I flew home. Special Agent James Hanrahan was my welcoming committee of one.

He said Mr. Kersh would like a few words with me, if I didn't mind. I said of course not and we went to the Federal Building FBI offices where I waited for three hours. The room was relatively comfortable, with twin sofas, a coffee machine, magazines, all the comforts, but no telephone.

I stretched out on one of the sofas and went to sleep. At first, it was an act, to show how unconcerned I was, but then I was waking up and Kersh was standing over me.

"You son of a bitch," he said in a low voice. He stamped across the room and opened a door. "Come on." This door had been locked earlier; it opened to a routine office with a government-issue desk, several chairs, not much else.

He motioned to a chair and seated himself behind the desk. He put the tape recorder on the desk but did not turn it on. "Off the record," he said. "How'd you get off the island? Where's the kid? Who's got the kid?"

"No, Mr. Kersh," I said. "On the record. Let's keep everything on the record." He flicked a switch on the tape recorder. "I've had a lot of time these past days," I said. "I thought it would be interesting to write an account of our various conversations in which I insisted that the child I saw was three or four, too old to be either of the children you claim to be looking for. I believe Mr. Milliken might become incensed if he learns that the whole FBI is using his personal tragedy as a screen, and it might amuse my correspondents to think of the whole FBI engaged in a manhunt for an infant hiding out by herself on the beach. I think the people I sent the copies to will share my sentiments. I told them all I would be back in town today, and if for any reason I didn't show up, to open the sealed envelopes and read the fairy tale I had written."

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He was not impressed. "You see too many movies. One of the things they don't tell you is that we have the advantage of time. Next week, next month, next year, all the time in the world. We'll find the child, you can be certain of that. But you'll never know when someone will drop by to ask just a few more questions, to clarify another point. You won't like that, Mr. Seton, never knowing if an agent is at the next table with another question. Now, about your statement. . . ."

As far as my original statement was concerned, I cooperated fully. I had told him the truth and there was no reason to alter anything. I refused to say anything about where I had gone, how I had left, if I had seen the child again. "Charge me with something and let me call my attorney," I said after four hours. "I want my car back and my various possessions. Now, if we're done here. . . ." I stood up.

I knew he had to be as tired and irritated as I was, but his smooth face remained imperturbable. He turned off the tape recorder and leaned back in his chair. "We really don't want her genes in the gene pool," he commented. "Bad, very bad mix. You've stashed her away somewhere, but not alone. Winter's coming on. She's with someone. We'll find out who that is, Seton. As I said, we have the benefit of time. You're free to go."

Cabs didn't cruise in Atlanta; I had to walk several blocks to the Carlton Hotel where I knew I could get one, and on the way I thought about the various people they would find and question. All my friends in Atlanta, my employees, my relatives. My ex, Susan, and Steve Falco in Los Angeles. Eventually they would get around to Joey, my best friend in high school. Would they get to Aunt Bett? I didn't see how. She had been my mother's friend, not mine, and she was not a relative. Then I realized that Kersh would expect me to be worried, maybe to get in touch with someone, give a warning. A grimmer thought followed quickly: Kersh would expect me to figure that out. He was toying with me, trying to make me nervous. And succeeding.

I stepped back into my life as if nothing had changed. Everyone at the office wanted to know why the FBI had been asking questions, and I said I was as baffled as they were. Gracie, my secretary, said maybe I had robbed some banks up North, and then she dimpled; it bugged the bejesus out of me. Gracie was smart or she wouldn't have had her job, that she did extremely well. But she still thought she could get a bigger payback

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through being cute. And there wasn't a thing I could do about it. If I told her to stop being so damned cute, she would pout, but prettily. The topic lost interest after a day or two, and routine took over.

I had been home a week, working hard to catch up, taking work home with me, staying at the office after hours. If they were watching, and I knew they were, there was nothing to report. On the next Saturday Kersh paid me a visit. I was working in my studio at home, in an old sweater, older sneakers, jeans. I opened the door and he was there, carrying his briefcase.

"What do you want now, Kersh? I'm pretty busy."

"You look like it. What a life you lead, this kind of house, work in comfortable clothes like that. I brought your car home. She's a real sweetheart." He held up the keys. "Mind if I step inside?"

It was a cold day, not rainy, but threatening, and a blustery wind started and stopped, started and stopped. I pulled the door open wider and stepped aside. He handed me the keys as he entered.

"It's really nice," he said. "These old houses are the greatest, aren't they?" He was looking past me into the living room.

"Do you want to search it?"

"No reason to. We know you're alone. Just admiring it. Mind if I see your studio?"

I shrugged and led him through the wide hall into a narrower one and on into one of the back rooms that had once been a sun-room, or sewing room, something like that. It had wide windows, no curtains. Even on this overcast day it was bright. It held my desk, piled high with proofs, manuscripts, glossies, mail. . . . The big drafting table was almost buried under more heaps of stuff, but the smaller drawing table was relatively clear. On a shelf were watercolors that I hadn't touched in several years. I had been working at the light table when he rang, spotting photographs, a job I shouldn't have to do, I grouched now and then, but one that no one else did to suit me. I stood in the center of the room and watched him take it all in.

Finally he nodded. "A real workroom, isn't it? Brought something to show you, if I can spread it out." He pulled a rolled-up paper from his briefcase and I cleared off the drawing table by picking up the few things on it and dumping them on the floor.

He grinned, and the change in his face was as remarkable as I recalled. He could change age at will by altering his expression.

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He unrolled the paper and spread it out. "You must know more about these things than I do," he said, almost apologetically. "It's how some of our people make projections."

What he had unrolled was a simple *x,y* graph.

"This upright line here is marked off in apparent age by years," he said, pointing, "and the bottom horizontal line is actual time in months. See?" He drew back and looked at me thoughtfully. "The really fine-tuned ones they're using are in days, but this will do. She was born here, zero day, zero month, zero year. We just added the points we're fairly sure of, you know, the foster parent who had her at one month, the Forbush woman who had her at six months, your report when she was eight months. Those are the points."

"And the lines?" I asked. My hands were sweating. I understood the lines drawn through the points.

"You know," he chided. "There's some dispute about some of the projections, but they went ahead and prepared them all anyway. For instance, between this one at six months, when she appeared to be a year and a half, to the time you saw her, when she looked three to four, that's pretty steep. But they went ahead and used it for one of the projections, although some of our people think she was stressed, that the stress resulted in the spurt that isn't her norm. You know, the plane crash, Max and his girlfriends, being alone on the beach. Pretty stressful. Anyway, if that's her growth line, see here, she'll reach twelve physically when she's seventeen months old. If you take this one, the average rate of growth through all the points, then she'll be two and a half when she reaches the physical age of twelve."

There were other lines and he explained them, but they were meaningless. If these projections were anywhere near right, then between one and a half to two and a half years after her birth, she would become an adolescent.

He rolled up the chart again. "She has a secret, a new way of metabolizing food maybe, something. A hormone, an enzyme, a new combination. Was there a food supply in that placenta, or the long umbilicus, enough to sustain rapid growth for a few hours? What if they could find what let her do that and inject it into livestock? What if they could use it to cure cancer? The men in the white coats are frothing at the mouth for her. Believe me, Seton, they will not harm a hair on that child's head. Hell, she could die of

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old age by the chronological age of six! They want her now. And they don't want her out there breeding. They'd much prefer her alive, of course, and even bearing children under supervision, but they'd rather have her body than have her out there breeding." The glint was in his eyes again. I didn't know what it was. Fanaticism? Zeal? Earnestness? Fatigue? Whatever brought it on was well repressed most of the time. I turned away from him. "They don't have a thing to base such conjectures on, and you know it. Hypotheses are cheap, let them dream."

"For now. For now, but not very much longer. Think of what it would do to the population if women had kids that easily, every few months here comes another one. No pain, no sweat. Hell, think what it would do to women, and the way women and men treat each other. And in a couple of years each new one's out doing it. You can make your own charts. Think about it Seton. I'll be seeing you."

I could make the charts, I thought after he had gone, and God help us all, in many ways he was right. I remembered what he had said about her, like a dinosaur on the beach, and with the memory I found myself at the drawing table sketching a dinosaur, then another, and another until I had a beach crowded with them, with one of them openmouthed, displaying many dagger teeth, looking down at a rock that a tiny mouse crouched behind fearfully. I stared at it a long time until finally, reluctantly, I drew in the balloon and lettered the words in big, bold caps: YOU'RE GOING TO DO WHAT?

What was Kersh waiting for? He knew by now that I had no intention of cooperating. I had read the novels, had seen the movies; I believed they had ways to get information out of people if they had to. Kersh had warned me that they would use whatever means they chose if too much time passed. Why? He could be gambling that I would panic and get word to her and run again, and that he would be able to intercept that word. Probably that was part of it. But the bigger part, I felt certain, was that they were still using me as bait, dangling me in the water so that eventually she would come to me. I had no doubt they were intercepting my mail and monitoring my phone calls. Everyone I talked to would be scrutinized; everyone I had lunch with, dined with, went to a show with.

Very quietly I began to drop out of the social circles that made up my Atlanta. I pleaded work, fatigue, deadlines, whatever came to mind. It

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wasn't fair to involve anyone else in this. I began to draw again, and even got out the watercolors and played with them, and the waiting game continued. Joey came down to visit his parents over the holidays, as he usually did, and we had dinner together, as we usually did. I passed him a large envelope addressed to Aunt Bett and asked him to remail it from New York. No questions. Inside the big envelope was a thousand dollars in mixed bills, for the child, I had written, and another envelope addressed to her. I was frustrated because I didn't know what name she would be using, and finally I wrote Francie. In this letter I expressed my fears that they would be watching me forever, that she must never try to reach me directly. I warned her about AIDS, herpes, drugs, men. . . . I told her everything I knew about her early months, the differences between her and other children. I told her that she had to move before June, and that I must not know where she had gone. They would wait until June, I prayed. It was parental stuff, I mocked myself, but I wrote it all out, and Joey took it to mail.

In February I celebrated her birthday by myself with a bottle of champagne. I couldn't even properly toast her because I didn't know her name for today.

In April I was home at ten on Saturday night, when the phone rang. "Win," she said, "Aunt Bett died Monday, and we buried her Wednesday. I left. I'll be all right. I wanted you to know. Thank you, Win. Thank you." That was all. The line buzzed and hummed and I stared at the wall behind the telephone stand.

Within the hour Kersh was there. "Who is Aunt Bett?" he demanded. I told him. He regarded me for a time, his face closed, the hard glint in his eyes. "You turned her into a streetwalker, Seton. She's in New York. It's little girls like her that grease the wheels that keep the city rolling. How many guys you suppose she'll have to blow tomorrow to make enough bread to stay alive?"

I wanted to kill him.

Winter into spring, spring into summer, the pace set in time immemorial; so it went. I put her out of mind; how big was she, how mature, how was she living, was she surviving, had they found her . . .? There were hours at a stretch that I didn't wonder what her name was today.

August, a heavy sultry month, with thunderstorms and windstorms and heat curtains rising from wet pavement, and visible steam at arm-

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length distance. Kersh came to see me. He was carrying a lightweight jacket, his shirt moist, his face moist. "You're selling out here?" he asked on the front porch.

I motioned him inside where the air conditioner failed to squeeze the humidity out of the air, merely reduced it somewhat. It always felt good for a couple of minutes. "So?"

"Heard you had a tempting offer," he said, and followed me to the living room, where he sank down into a leather-covered chair and sighed. "Can't take the heat," he explained.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing." He held up his hand. "Honestly, Seton, nothing. Just heard you might be selling the business, wondered."

"I might be. Haven't decided."

"You're not exactly what they call a quick decision maker," he commented. "She's still out there."

I shrugged. "You want some iced tea?"

"Yeah, that would be good." He followed me to the kitchen and watched while I prepared two glasses of tea. "We don't want you to get out of touch," he said easily. "You know, keep up the friendship, that sort of thing. Tired of the business?"

Tired to death of it, I thought, and did not respond. I squeezed a lemon and added a dash of juice to each glass, handed one over to him. Tired of deadlines, bad photographs, delayed orders. Irritable with incompetence. Sick of dealing. Tired. Over the last two years I had had three tempting offers, the one he had got wind of, God alone knew how, the most tempting of the lot. The conglomerates couldn't start companies for shit, but they liked to acquire them after they were up and running.

What I wanted to do was load up the T-bird and drive, and drive, and drive. Take a picture now and then, sketch something or other now and then, and drive again.

Very politely I waited until he had finished his tea before I asked, "I assume you came to deliver that message? Stay in touch? Anything else?"

He drained the glass and set it down. "I figure, one, she's dead. Six weeks for an inexperienced kid like that is a lifetime in the Big Apple. Or, two, she's hooked on something. They like to hook them young. They never stray after that. Or, three, she's sick, infected already with half a dozen baddies. The morgue, the hospitals, the jails, they're keeping an eye out.

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We figure she'll turn up in one of them. But in case she doesn't, we still think she might want to renew old acquaintances with you. When she's sick enough, or broke enough, or hurting enough. That's the message. Just stay in touch. Be seeing you, Seton. I think I can find the front door again."

I let him find it alone. I hadn't told anyone about the newest offer, yet they had found out. What else? What else was there to learn? I asked myself bitterly. His three possibilities seemed all too real, and they would be the first to know.

August, hurricane month, a hurricane hanging off the coast, bringing torrential rains inland. Atlanta had two inches within six hours, and there was flooding, as usual, and stalled transportation, grounded planes. I stood at the office window watching the wakes being left by cars leaving work before the floods got worse. Gracie had gone already, Phil had left, the building was emptying fast. And the telephone rang.

I never used the official answering procedure; I never remembered what it was. I merely said, "Hello."

"Win, darling, is it you? I thought I'd never find anyone I knew."

"Who is this?" I asked, irritated at the whispery promise of the voice.

"Darling, and you said you'd never forget! It's Francie, Win, darling. I'm stranded out at the airport."

Francie. I closed my eyes hard and clung to the telephone as if it were saving me from the abyss below.

"I thought maybe you knew a way to get out here," she went on, husky, suggestive. "I mean, we're grounded, and they don't know when they'll fly. I got a room at the airport hotel, but I'm lonesome."

It's Francie, she said. Sassy Francie! I asked. Just Francie.

"If you can't," she said, "I mean, really can't, that's all right, sweetie. I just thought how nice it would be to get together, since I'm here. You know. Talk over old times." She laughed a low dirty laugh. "You never got back to New Orleans, did you?"

"Never did. Look, I'll be out there as soon as I can get through. It will be good to see you after so long."

She laughed again and told me the bar she would be in, and hung up. I had broken out in a sweat and my hands were shaky.

I took a deep breath and tried to think. They would have listened, they would be right there with me even if I didn't know who they were. They would pick up a glass she touched, take away a table or chair, lift

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fingerprints, match them. . . . I told her to stay away from me, I thought furiously. This was exactly what they had waited for. But they wouldn't connect her with that voice, I argued with myself; she sounded just like a New Orleans whore. They would be looking for a little girl, an adolescent girl. And they knew how long it had been since I had been with a woman. It would look even more suspicious if I didn't go; she had practically undressed by phone. Maybe I could smudge any prints she might have left, find out what she was after, send her packing again. . . .

I got there faster than I expected; most people were heading for town, not the airport, since all flights had been grounded. The wind was gusting around forty to fifty miles an hour, and the rain was coming down hard enough to put another two inches on the ground before midnight. Her timing, her excuse for calling, everything she had done had been perfectly planned, and when I saw her, the deception seemed total. She looked like a high-priced New Orleans call girl. She had on black lace stockings, gloves to match, a narrow shiny black miniskirt, low-cut frilly blouse, and her hair was long, thick, and black. She fluttered fake eyelashes as she slipped off a barstool. Every man in the place watched her slithering walk as she came to greet me.

I felt as awkward as if I had entered a cathouse to find it full of Sunday-school teachers who all knew me. She laughed and took my arm. "Relax, honey. Let's have a little drink and then go someplace quiet where we can . . . talk." One of the men nearby laughed and turned back around; he said something to his companion, who also laughed, and Francie and I found a table.

The bartender came over and called her doll and she called him handsome and ordered Perrier and then said, "Let's see if I remember, Win, darling. It used to be a very dry Gibson, vodka Gibson. Am I right?"

I nodded and she laughed at the bartender, winked, and said, "I never forget the important things."

As soon as he was gone I leaned forward and whispered, "We've got to get out of here. I'm being followed."

She kissed the tip of her finger and touched it to my lips, smiling. "You northern businessmen are always in such a hurry. So impetuous. Let me tell you about the flight, Win darling. I was never so scared in my life when that plane began to rock back and forth, up and down. Why, you couldn't get me back on an airplane with a stick, not until the storm's all the way

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gone, and the sun's shining and all. And I believe it could go on raining all night, into tomorrow. You know?"

She was perfect, I had to admit. She had the accent down, the flirtatious glances at other men, the way she flirted outrageously with the bartender, her chatter. . . . She had even thought about fingerprints. I drank the Gibson, and she sipped her water, and eventually we were ready to leave. She took my arm and held it hard against her when we walked out. Perfect.

In her room I hurried to close the drapes, and she turned on the radio and fiddled with it until she had loud rock, and then we sat on the side of the bed. Slowly she pulled off the black wig, and then peeled off her fake eyelashes. Her hair was brown and short with deep waves. Her eyes were golden brown.

"Why did you come here?" I asked in a low voice. "Is anything wrong?"

She shook her head. "I had to see you, let you see me, know it's finished. I don't know. Aunt Bett died, Win."

"I know. Where did you go? How did you live?"

"She gave me most of the money you had been sending, and I had the other money you sent. It was a lot. She said to tell you thank you. She made me promise to say thank you for her."

I wanted very much to put my arm around her, draw her close and comfort her, but this was not the child I had found in Atlantic City. I couldn't touch this young woman and I knew it. We spoke in low voices, sometimes hers was hardly audible as she told me how she had managed.

"There was a school for girls, you know, with uniforms. I bought a uniform like theirs and no one paid any attention to me around there. And there was a big building where a lot of people slept in the halls, under the steps, and I did too." I shuddered, and she said quickly, "It wasn't bad. I bought some toothpaste, the kind without any smell or taste, and I would chew it up a little, mix it with spit, and then make little bubbles at the side of my mouth, and no one came near me. I learned to roll my eyes funny too. Like this." She rolled her eyes and looked demented.

"Christ," I muttered and ducked my head.

She put her hand on my arm, then hurriedly pulled it away again. "It was O.K.," she said softly. "Honest, it was. When I grew a little more I got other clothes and then I hung out around the university, I even got a room near there, and after that it was really all right. I went to the library and read a lot. I kept changing, though, you know, growing. Not taller. Just getting

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more mature. And I began to think about you, and how much I wanted to see you again. . . ." Her voice trailed off and stopped.

After a moment I pointed to the wig at the foot of the bed. "Where did you learn that act?"

She laughed deep in her throat. "Wasn't I good! I read things, and saw movies, and I watched the women on the streets, how they walked, how they talked to men."

And never forgot a thing, I finished silently when she stopped again. I stood up and walked to the window and pulled the drape open a bit. The rain was pelting down harder than ever. No doubt the airport road would go underwater within the hour. I pulled the drape shut and turned back to her. "Now what?" She obviously no longer needed help. Maybe a little money, but no more than that. She could go anywhere, be anyone she chose.

"I don't know," she said in a voice so low that this time I couldn't hear her over the loud radio, but read her lips, and remembered how she had moved her lips sounding out words less than a year ago.

Abruptly she stood up and came across the room to take my hand. She headed for the bathroom with me in tow, and there she closed the door and turned on the shower full blast. "The radio was driving me batty," she said with a faint smile. Almost instantly she was somber again. "I know how different I am, Win. It is possible that my mother used a drug that caused chromosomal damage, scrambling, breaks, something of the sort, and this difference will be self-limiting. I won't breed true. But it is also possible that I am a true genetic sport, something new, and my children will be also. In either event, those people who want to study me won't rest until I am dead. They will hunt and hunt. Intellectually, I don't blame them; I would do the same in their place. But I'm not in their place, and I don't know how it would feel to be like them, like you, like anyone else. This, how I am, feels natural. I don't feel like a freak or a monster."

"God," I whispered. "Oh, God, Francie. You're not a monster. You're a beautiful woman."

"Make love to me, Win. Please. You've taught me so much. Will you teach me that?" She touched my cheek.

I reached past her and turned off the shower, then I picked her up and carried her to bed and taught her about love.

"What I would like," she whispered that night, "is to live on a

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mountainside with trees all around, and a fresh little brook with fish. And no people. But what would you do in such a place?"

"Oh, I'd keep the house in good repair, cut wood for the fires, and I would paint and take pictures."

"Good," she said with a nod, as if that were settled. "And I would teach the children the way Aunt Bett taught me. I would teach them the names of the flowers, and which plants you can eat, and how algebra works, and how to make biscuits, and where the Serengeti Plain is located. The girls would go out and meet men and pick carefully which ones, and then come home to have their babies." She laughed softly. "Grandparents."

When she slept, I studied her face in the dim light from the bathroom. How very beautiful she had become, such fine bones, such soft skin. This, I understood finally, was why I had helped that child on the beach, why I had hidden the girl from the world; to get to this moment I had to do those things, this moment had been determined. I smiled at how foolish that sounded, but I believed it. I touched her cheek as she slept and she smiled and moved closer without waking up. Tomorrow I would send her away. I would make her promise never to come near me again, never to call, or write. She could make it now by herself. I was the only menace for her, and eventually I would betray her. I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to look at her, to touch her cheek now and then, to see her smile, but I dozed, and when I woke up she was moving around the room with a towel.

"What are you doing?"

She came to the bed and knelt by me. "Wiping off my fingerprints. I just thought of it," she whispered.

I pulled her into the bed and made love to her again, and I did not tell her that no prints would be as much a giveaway as finding a full set of clear prints. When I woke up again it was nine in the morning and she was gone. I knew it as soon as I opened my eyes. Last night her presence had filled the space, and now it was just a bleak and empty hotel room.

SEPTEMBER. OCTOBER. I decided to sell the business the day I stared at spotted photographs and didn't give a damn. I told my lawyer and my accountant to take care of it, my only real demand was that those who wanted to keep their jobs would be allowed to. Not a big stumbling block. For a few days I expected Kersh to come calling, but he didn't; maybe he was walking the streets of New Orleans

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looking for a black-haired hooker in a shiny tight skirt.

I wanted desperately to hear her voice, to know she was well, and, more desperately, I wanted her to stay away, not to call, not to write. One day I found myself sorting books, stacking some, boxing others, and I realized that I had made the decision to sell the house as well as the business. I had to move away so she could not find me.

November. The Thanksgiving homecoming-weekend party was to be held at the Carlton Hotel; as it was every year. Our team, win or lose, rah, rah. I was home when she called. "Hey, Win," she said in a bubbly voice, "it's Rosalee. You've been hiding out long enough, bubba. Come to the party Saturday. Duck away from the mobs and hit the little parties in 820, 614, 1030. See ya!"

Numbly I hung up. She was insane, coming back, calling. She knew they were monitoring my line. She knew they watched me day after day, night after night. I wouldn't go near the Carlton, I thought, and rejected that. She was in town, and might call again, suggest something else, and at least at the homecoming party there would be hordes of young people. Would she come as a cheerleader? A football groupie? Whatever it was, she would blend right in, I knew.

I had been shopping for gifts for everyone at the office; now I shopped for just the right present for her. Something I could keep at hand without arousing suspicions. Something I could pass over when I told her I was leaving the city, leaving the state. I tried to figure out what she had meant by the numbers she had given me, and failed. There were always the private room parties, always jammed; she wouldn't be planning to meet me in any of them, and I could not recombine the numbers in any way to make sense. I stalked through stores searching for the gift, and worked with the numbers, and looked at more stuff. Just stuff. Not for her.

Then I found it. A gossamer sheer kimono in gleaming white silk, as soft as a cloud, with a single red rose embroidered on the back, and a delicate gold-thread edging on the front. I passed it up, went back and felt it, and bought it. The box was too big to carry around a party, but it was hers. It looked as if it had been made for her alone, had been there waiting for me. I had it gift-wrapped and carried it home in a shopping bag.

Saturday night the Carlton was like an asylum with all attendants out on strike. The party took up three large downstairs rooms, the dining room, the lounge and bar. I carried the shopping bag in with me and made my way

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to the cloakroom. I had decided to check it in with my coat and pass her the claim check when we met; it seemed the best I could do. Moving through the lobby was a slow business; I knew half the people there, it seemed, and had not seen many of them for a long time. Everyone was happy and loud.

At the cloakroom I waited in line, then passed over the coat and the shopping bag, talking to one of my old teachers and his wife. The young woman behind the counter pressed the claim check into my hand, and at the touch, I pivoted. *You*. She smiled pleasantly and was already taking the coat of the next man in line. I looked at my hand; I held the claim check, and also a room key.

She had told me the time, I realized: 10:30. Room parties were going on up and down the tenth floor. Men were reliving moments of glory, reenacting plays, throwing a pillow here, a real football there. . . . A bunch of them were lined up for the kickoff in the hall. . . . I visited one party after another, stayed for a minute or two, then moved on: 9:30, 9:40, 9:45. I hit another room party, accepted another drink that I would not taste, talked to people, and instantly forgot what we talked about and even who they were. I didn't know who was watching me, but then, I never did. Ten twenty. I got on the elevator on the tenth floor and rode down to six with people I didn't know. On six I left the group, entered the stairwell, and started the climb up to the fourteenth floor.

If I saw anyone I hadn't known for a long time, I would go to ten, do another party or two, and then go home, I told myself. I was sure that no one had noticed when I entered the stairwell, and you couldn't find anyone in the crowds milling about if you had to. Just to make certain, I left the stairs on eleven and walked the length of the corridor. It was quiet up here; the parties were being confined to ten, eight and six, and the main floors. I found other stairs and went up the remaining floors. No thirteen.

On fourteen an elderly couple passed me in the hall. We all nodded; they went on to the elevator and I went on to room number 1418. At first I thought she wasn't there yet. A small table was near the tall double windows that were open to a tiny balcony with a lovely vista of Atlanta by night. Everything out there glittered. On the table was a champagne bottle in a cooler and two glasses. Then she moved into sight on the balcony. "Isn't it beautiful?" she said. She had changed her clothes from the black-and-white uniform she had worn earlier to a long pale-blue skirt and

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matching sweater. She was more beautiful than I remembered.

"I have a present for you," she said, and picked up a slim package on the table.

"And I checked a present for you."

Her eyes shifted and widened. Staring past me, she whispered, "Promise you'll take them home, Win. Keep the presents as mementos. Promise. Don't forget me."

I spun around to see Kersh and two other men entering the room without a sound. One of them leaped toward her, knocking me out of the way, but she was on the balcony, the table between her and the rest of us. She looked at me another second, turned, and swung her legs over the railing, and then stepped off.

For a moment no one moved, then I screamed, and lunged toward the balcony. Someone clipped me behind the ear and I fell to my knees.

They took me to a different room where I sat in a large chair while people came and went. I couldn't weep for her; I had no tears, only the deadening knowledge that I had done it, I had failed her. I failed my mother who drove her car into a tree doing ninety miles an hour. Failed my ex-wife who thought she needed plastic breasts. Failed Aunt Bett who had lived so many years in poverty and loneliness. Failed the little girls who oiled the wheels of New York. Failed the social worker who wept because they wouldn't give her what she needed to save children. Failed them all.

Kersh brought the little package from the other room and asked me to open it. It was a book with hand-painted illustrations of common flowers with their names. He leafed through it and handed it back to me. "Do you want someone to take you home?"

I stood up and started to walk toward the door.

"Seton, hold on a second," Kersh said heavily. He regarded me for a moment, then said, "It's over. We aren't going to bother you anymore. You understand? You couldn't have prevented this. We've been getting closer for weeks now. We weren't going to wait any longer. Do you understand what I'm telling you? Get in that big pretty car of yours and drive, Seton. Just drive a long time."

Someone went down the elevator with me; although it was after two in the morning, there was still a mob in the lobby, but subdued, huddling in small groups. No one paid any attention as the agent led me through the clusters of people and retrieved my coat and shopping bag. He went to the

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outer door with me, and I walked on alone to my car.

It was a long time before I turned the key in the ignition, a long time before I shifted into gear and began to drive. At home, I carried in the packages. *Promise. Don't forget me.* I opened the book but could not focus on the pictures, the words. A gold bookmark was in it. I opened to that page, and the words seemed to leap at me. "'Sassy Francie,' *Saxifraga*, sometimes called Mother of Thousands."

I looked up at the shopping bag then, and I knew. I had noticed without conscious awareness, but I knew it held more than I had put in it. My hand was shaking when I reached inside and brought out a small box, the size of a shoe box for children's shoes. It was wrapped in silver foil and had been

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pierced all over. Carefully I lifted the top and saw her, our daughter, curled in sleep, clothed in a tiny garment attached to the sides of the box, which was padded and covered with pink silk. Then I wept.

She had known it could never end as long as she lived, but our daughter was free. I would find the mountainside with the forests all around; I would teach her what she needed to know, and her children and theirs. It would take careful planning; no one must suspect until they had scattered everywhere, like seeds on the wind. There would be time to think and plan as I drove.

"Your name will be Rose," I murmured to my child, who would fit in the palm of my hand. I had begun naming the flowers.

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Coming Attractions

HARRY TURTLEDOVE provides our March cover story. "Vermin" is the tale of Victoria Griffin, a colonist living in New Zion. New Zion is a religious colony, which has to put up with bugs, the outrageous natives, and the unbelievers at the Federation Research base. But Victoria is tired. She's tired of the native Haldol with their loose morals, and she's tired of the bugs. She wants to do something about it, but she might have to contact the godless people at the research base . . .

David Brin returns to these pages with a different kind of science fiction story. In "Detritus Affected," he examines the work of urban archeologists, who solve mysteries of the past by digging through landfills. The story centers around a garbage pile in future Los Angeles and the great, powerful secret it reveals.

Science fiction writer **Rob Chilson** offers the issue's fantastic element. Craik-Foster has decided to run the largest con of his life: going straight. He has bought an English country manor, and is furnishing it with stolen antiques. When he holds his first dinner party, he discovers that something his guests expect — in fact, something they demand — is missing. Every English country house should have its own ghost. Hmm, what's an old thief to do?

Future issues will continue our mix of sf, fantasy and horror. Carolyn Ives Gilman returns with a lovely fantasy story about "The Wild Ships of Fairny." Mystery writer Ed Gorman will make his first appearance in these pages, and Walter Jon Williams will share a wonderful alternate history novella. Also look for stories from favorites Esther M. Friesner, Robert Reed, R. Garcia y Robertson, and Grania Davis.

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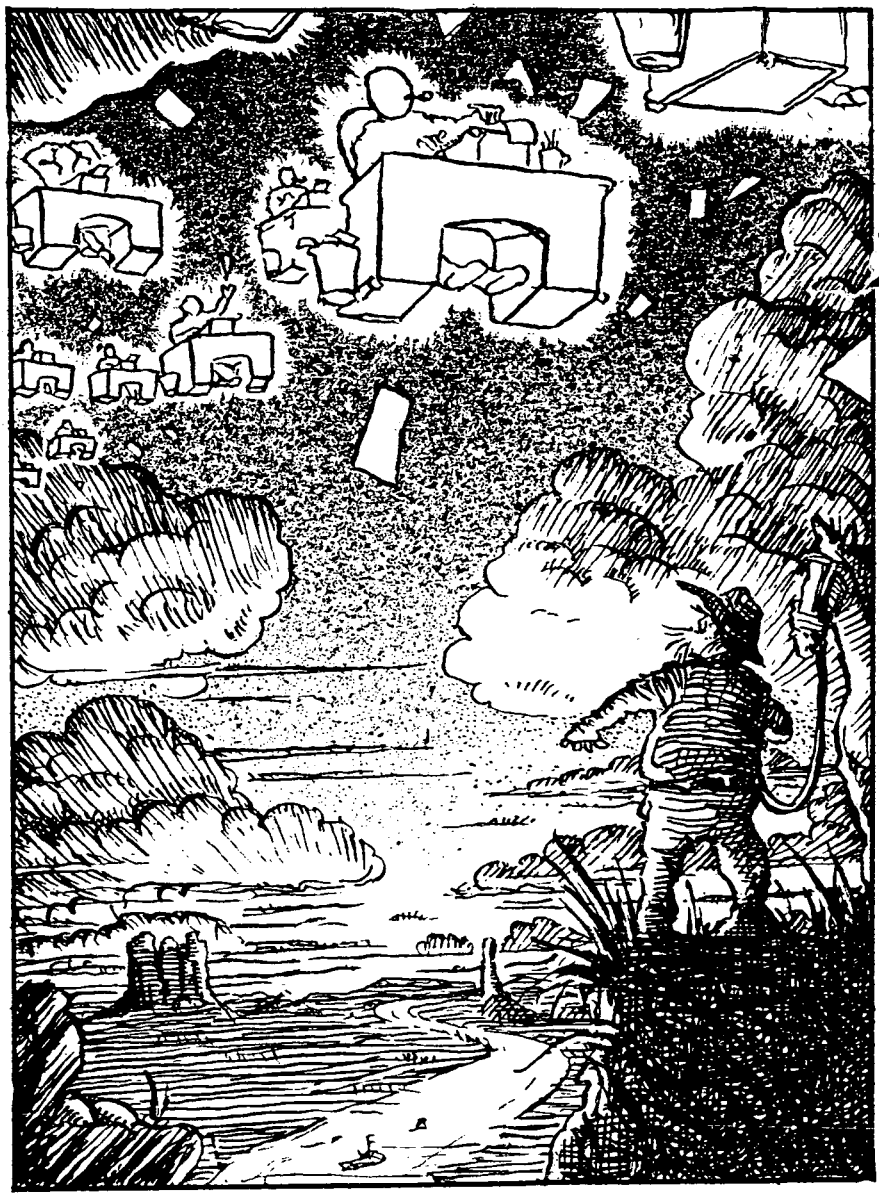

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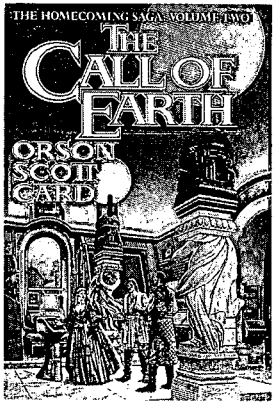

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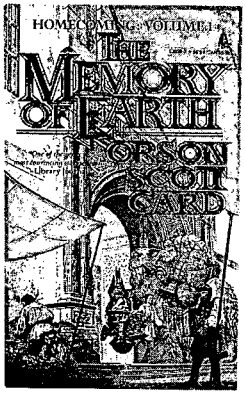

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